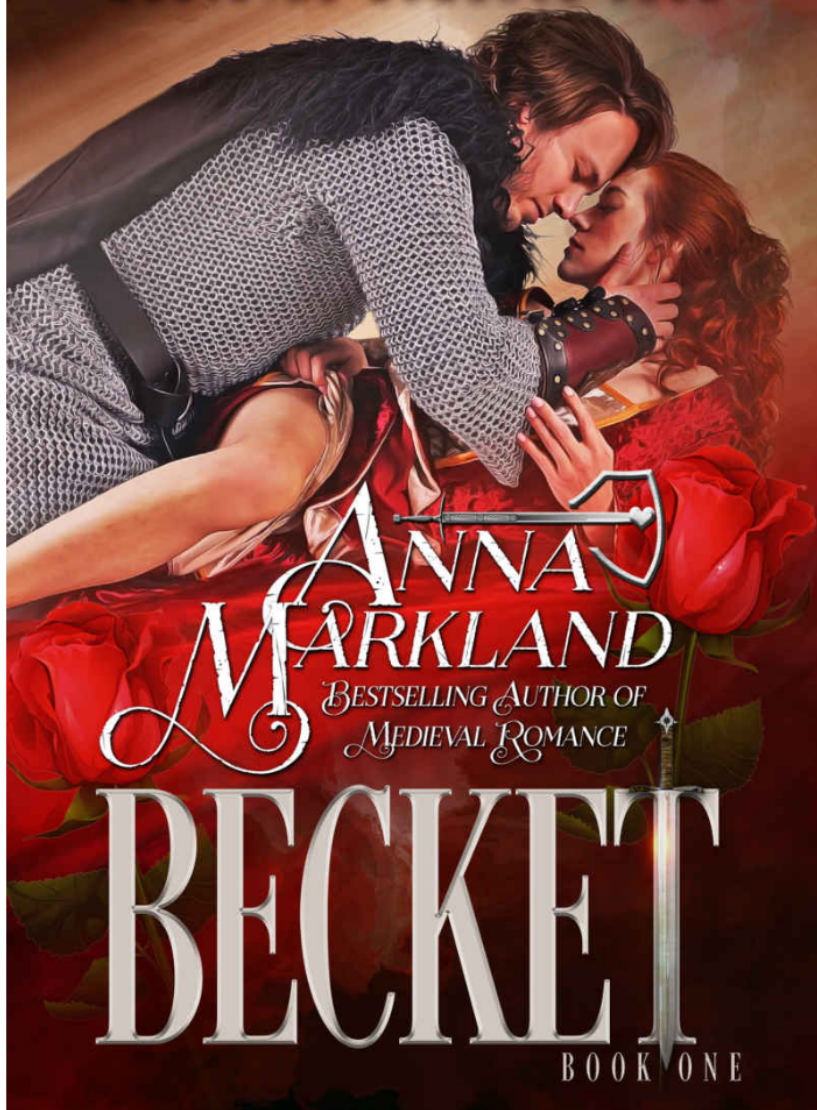


THE MONTBRYCE DYNASTY
MEDIEVAL ROMANCE SAGA



BOOK ONE

Becket

Anna Markland

Contents

More Anna Markland
Siege
No Backbone
Heaven Sent
Orphans
A Means Of Escape
Leaving Gaillard
Wolfpack
Arrival At Montbryce
In Hot Water
Gullible Fool
Web Of Lies
The First Test
Isolation
The Dagger
Homecoming
Our Guest From Cumbria
Holy Friday
Resurrection
Thwarted
Subterfuge
He Knows
Not So Bad
Hard To See The Good
Act One
The Kiss
A Dog With A Bone
A Tentative Plan
Confidence
Crossing
Arrival

Adelina
The Galley Has Gone
Two Choices
Confessions
Now, I Know
No Escape
Keep Calm
Practice Makes Perfect
Flight
Preparations Underway
Bathing
A Naked Valet
Called Away
Ups And Downs
The Tower Of Rouen
King Philip
A Fly On The Wall
Doubts
Delayed Gratification
A Wedding
Impatient
Fulfillment
Epilogue
About Anna

Becket
The Montbryce Dynasty, Book I
By
Anna Markland

©Copyright 2021

Becket by Anna Markland

Book One, The Montbryce Dynasty

© 2021 Anna Markland

www.annamarkland.com

All rights reserved. This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. It may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author. This book or parts thereof may not be reproduced in any form, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the publisher, except as provided by United States of America copyright law. For permissions contact: anna@annamarkland.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover Art by Dar Albert

More Anna Markland

Anna has authored more than sixty bestselling, award-winning and much-loved Medieval, Viking and Highlander historical romance novels and novellas. No matter the setting, many of her series recount the adventures of successive generations of one family, with emphasis on the importance of ancestry and honor. A detailed list can be found at annamarkland.com.

Siege

Gaillard, Normandie, March 6th, 1204 AD

The long siege was over at last.

Château Gaillard, the impregnable fortress built by King Richard, had finally capitulated. The last of the exhausted defenders had surrendered to the superior numbers of French and Norman besiegers.

Sickened and wearied by the horror that had dragged on for two years, Becket de Montbryce felt no sense of victory. He scanned the bloody scene, searching for his younger brothers, relieved when he caught sight of them.

Jaw clenched, Roland met his gaze and nodded, blood trickling from beneath his helmet as he stepped over the dead. Adrien leaned against the low wall of a well, staring into nothingness.

“Finalement,” the French commander exulted, jolting Becket back to the stench of blood and decay all around them. “Normandie is ours.”

Over the course of the interminable ordeal, Becket thought he’d become reconciled to allying his forces with his country’s age-old enemy, but the foreign tongue still irked.

“We have ousted King John from your land,” Vause crowed in French. “You Normans will no longer travail under the yoke of the tyrant. Now, you are Frenchmen.”

Becket fisted his hand, sorely tempted to punch the fellow’s bulbous nose. He was confident his brothers and the rest of the Norman contingent would join the fight, but it was pointless to provoke a melee. The Normans were well-trained and disciplined, but they were also outnumbered. The time had come to face reality.

Along with the majority of noble Norman families, the Montbryces acknowledged months ago it was imperative John Lackland’s oppressive rule of Normandie come to an end.

However, no Montbryce could forget that their Viking ancestors had fought long and hard to wrest vast tracts of land from the French. Leaving behind a brutal life in Norway, they’d helped the

legendary Rollo carve out a powerful duchy in the fertile valleys of the Western Frankish kingdom. They'd named the new land Normandie, the Territory of the Norsemen.

"Now, we Normans will serve the *benevolent* King Philip," Becket replied to Vause, not caring if the man took offense at the sarcasm directed at the cruel French king. Four hundred years as an independent duchy had come to a violent and bloody end. The path was now clear for the French to swarm into Normandie. As a Norman *vicomte*, Becket had become a subject of the conniving, and often brutal, King Philip Augustus of France.

Vause bristled. "Take your men and clear out the survivors who remain in the encampment outside the walls," he commanded before stalking away.

"It appears the French commander has discerned your sarcasm," Roland remarked when he reached Becket.

"And this is our reward for your impudence," Adrien quipped, clamping a heavy hand on Becket's shoulder.

The three brothers clasped hands and stood together in silence for long minutes. They might tease and taunt each other, as they had since boyhood, but they were glad to be alive. Becket had dreaded bearing his brothers' bodies home.

The possible consequences of Gaillard's fall weighed heavily on him and his brothers. They would fight to protect Montbryce Castle should Philip of France decide to be greedy as he marched through Normandie.

Roland finally broke the silence. "I doubt there are any survivors in the camp outside the walls."

Becket gritted his teeth. People from the village of Gaillard, fellow Normans, had sought refuge in the castle when French forces approached two years ago. The desperate castellan had evicted them when feeding too many mouths became impossible—but they'd been refused permission to cross French lines by order of King Philip. Denied access to the village, they returned to the castle only to find the gates barred against them by Roger de Lacy.

Over the course of the last three months, many had starved or frozen to death in the no-man's-land beneath the castle walls. Becket considered their plight barbaric and of no benefit to either side. He'd chafed at his utter helplessness to do anything about it other than smuggle leftover scraps from his army's cook tents to them—earning Vause's ire in the process.

Roland scowled. “Despite our sacrifices and those of our men, we’re not to be granted the satisfaction of remaining inside Gaillard with the rest of the victorious besiegers.”

Watching Vause strut away, Becket realized he preferred the task they’d been given. “I suspect most of the undisciplined French soldiers have rape and plunder on their minds.” The prospect turned his stomach. “The Normans who’ve held out for so long inside Gaillard have suffered enough.”



* * *

Huddled with a dozen whimpering women in a dank cellar in Gaillard’s underbelly, Marguerite d’Aigremont lamented her fate as the sounds of battle drew ever closer. She suspected the besiegers had broken through to the inner ward. Sword clanged on sword; men shouted and screamed. The smell of blood penetrated even the dark refuge.

For two long years, Marguerite had firmly believed Château Gaillard would withstand the siege. Now, along with every other terrified soul in the cellar, she accepted that the end was at hand.

Not for the first time, she thirsted to protest that she wasn’t even Norman, and she certainly wasn’t French. However, as the siege dragged on, she’d come to realize no one cared that she was an Englishwoman trapped in a Norman stronghold—all thanks to the misrule of her distant cousin, who happened to be the King of England and Duke of Normandie.

At first, she’d boasted of her kinship with John, though the distant relationship had never worked to her advantage. After John failed to dispatch an army to relieve the siege, she learned to keep her mouth shut.

It was all for naught. Every woman in the cellar, be she peasant or of noble blood, knew what awaited her at the hands of the

victorious French—and the treacherous Norman counts who'd joined forces with the enemy to oust John as Duke of Normandie.

And if King Philip of France discovered she was John's cousin...

No Backbone

Marguerite decided to crawl out of the cellar and put her fate in God's hands. If she could reach it, the chapel would be a more fitting place for a noblewoman to die. There was always a remote chance the French soldiers might respect the notion of sanctuary.

Having miraculously encountered no one on the way, she tiptoed into the strangely quiet chapel and breathed a sigh of relief. It took a moment to notice a group of nuns kneeling in silence at the altar rail. They didn't seem to have taken note of her arrival.

Exhausted, filthy and terrified, she sank to her knees and sobbed.

Gradually, she became aware of a robed figure standing beside her. Looking up into the kind eyes of an elderly nun, she struggled to recall the woman's name.

"*Soeur* Thomasse," the nun said softly. "You are Marguerite d'Aigremont."

"I am," she rasped from her dry throat.

"Don't despair. I have a plan."

Utterly confused, Marguerite accepted the faded, musty-smelling habit Thomasse thrust into her hands.

"It's your only chance, my lady," the frail nun insisted. "They might violate even God's servants, but there is always a chance we will escape that fate. Your blood ties to King John will condemn you."

Marguerite gaped, astonished this nun she had no recollection of meeting before knew who she was. The woman seemed alarmingly calm, given the real possibility the sisters who had survived two years of deprivation might be raped and murdered by the hated French. The lead ball of dread lodged in Marguerite's stomach became heavier. "You are so calm," she rasped in a hoarse voice she barely recognized.

Thomasse smiled benevolently. "We do not fear death."

Marguerite wished she could say the same, but she could smell her own fear. She barely managed to remove her soiled gown and don the stiff layers of religious garb. Thomasse assisted with the

tight coif that rendered breathing difficult. The starched sides projected like wings in front of her face. The intent was to prevent a nun from being distracted by the world around her but the blinders would keep Marguerite's features well hidden.

The white cornette wedged on her head reminded her of a swan ready to take flight. It seemed destined to draw attention rather than deflect it, but she had little choice.

"A final touch," Thomasse whispered, smearing some kind of dust from a jar on Marguerite's cheeks and forehead. "Saved from the Ash Wednesday observance," she explained.

Thomasse must have seen the sheathed dagger Marguerite had lashed to her forearm months ago when the rule of law began to break down—but the stoic nun said nothing. The habit's wide sleeve hid the weapon and actually made it easier to reach.

From the onset of the siege, Marguerite had confidently and, in hindsight, arrogantly, reassured the noblewomen within Gaillard that there was no possibility the impregnable castle built by her late cousin Richard would fall. After all, Richard's brother, John, who was now King of England, had invited her there, though he'd failed to send news of the betrothal supposedly arranged for her. He'd probably forgotten she was trapped in Gaillard.

She abhorred John's cruelty and resented his feckless nature, but he was Duke of Normandie as well as King of England. Hence, she argued, the Normans would ride to relieve Gaillard, a castle within the boundaries of their own territory, the last bastion protecting Normandie from a French invasion. Even when the treacherous Norman *comtes* joined forces with the French, she hadn't given up hope.

Now, the grain stores were empty, there were no more animals to slaughter for meat and no potable water. Hundreds had died of disease and starvation. The inescapable stench of death hung in the air. For the first time in her life, Marguerite knew hunger, thirst and mind-numbing fear.

Why else would she be garbed in a dead nun's malodorous habit that hung off her gaunt frame like a shroud? It was undignified for a woman with royal blood in her veins. She should summon more backbone and face her fate like the noblewoman she was. But she was too terrified.

"We must request permission to tend the wretches in the camp outside the walls," Thomasse said quietly. "It's our duty and

perhaps an opportunity to get you out.”

Grinding her teeth and absentmindedly fingering the smooth wood of the crucifix hanging from the rope around her waist, Marguerite could only nod.

“May God have mercy on us,” another nun whispered, signing the cross of her Savior.

Marguerite was too paralyzed to make even that small gesture.

For an hour, she knelt with the nuns before the altar. The bloodcurdling screams emanating from the streets rendered prayer impossible. Women begged for mercy; children wailed in fear.

Marguerite was jolted from her trance when jubilant French soldiers thrust open the doors. Gooseflesh marched up her spine. The reek of sweating men, leather and blood swirled in. Strident boot heels clicked on the tiled floor. From outside, only the celebrations of the victors reached their ears. There was music—drums and shwams, if she wasn’t mistaken—alien sounds she hadn’t heard within the walls of Gaillard for many months.

A strange acceptance crept into her heart as the confident boot-steps neared the altar. Raising her eyes to the crucified Christ, she fingered the dagger, resolved to stab any filthy Frenchman or treacherous Norman who thought to violate her. She’d never harmed another person in her life, but she would kill if necessary. “Forgive me, Lord,” she whispered.

With the nuns, she rose from her aching knees. It wasn’t hard to pretend to be a crippled old woman.

“This is a house of God,” Thomasse declared loudly without a trace of fear in her voice.

Marguerite wished she had even a smidgen of the woman’s courage.

The soldiers paused, their laughter silenced.

A spark of hope flickered in Marguerite’s breast when she noted the intruders weren’t rank and file soldiers. Their bearing and mode of dress bespoke officers, men of worth. Nobles in blood and noble of heart, she hoped.

“*Ma soeur*,” one replied with an extravagant bow and a false smile that sent alarm skittering through Marguerite. “I am Pierre de Vause, *Comte de Blois*. I now command this castle and the people in it, including you and your sisters. My officers will be billeted in your fine chapel.”

Marguerite gripped the hilt of her dagger. At least Vause was a

Frenchman and not a Norman traitor.

“We answer only to God,” Thomasse replied without hesitation. “Our first duty will be to minister to the wretches in the camp outside the walls.”

Vause snorted. “Most of them are beyond your help.”

Thomasse lifted her chin. “Nevertheless.”

Vause’s beady eyes roved over the nuns.

Marguerite fought to keep her eyes downcast, convinced he was deciding which among them he might allow outside the walls. Would he hear the frantic beating of her heart and guess she was not what she appeared to be?

Eventually, she, Thomasse and Hectorine were given permission. The younger sisters were ordered to remain. Marguerite was dizzy with relief, but guilt weighed heavily as she watched Thomasse bless every one of the half dozen pale-faced women who were to stay behind. She shuffled out of the chapel with head bowed, grateful that hunger, despair and leftover ashes had rendered her too odious to rape.

Heaven Sent

Beneath Gaillard's walls, Becket walked slowly through what Vause euphemistically referred to as a camp, certain he had descended into hell. "A camp suggests shelter," he muttered to his brothers. "Here, there is none."

He was a warrior who'd fought in more than one campaign for his hateful duke, John Lackland, but had never seen suffering on such a scale. The thousand or so unfortunate souls trapped outside the walls of Gaillard a few months ago were reduced to perhaps a hundred near-skeletal wraiths.

"Without our help," Roland replied, "these survivors will soon join the rotting corpses piled haphazardly beneath the wall."

Afraid to breathe the fetid air, Becket removed his helmet, withdrew the woolen remnant he kept inside his gambeson, covered his face and knotted it behind his head. The original plaid had belonged to his Scottish grandmother, Elayne. His brothers used their own scraps of the same plaid as masks. Becket hoped the talisman protecting their faces would give them strength to help the desperate villagers who lay strangely silent on the frost-rutted ground. Were they even aware the siege had come to an end?

The dead needed to be carried away and given a decent burial. There would be time for that later and Becket wouldn't expect it of his soldiers yet. The first priority was to do what they could for the living. He ordered his men to scrounge and distribute blankets and food.

However, neither he nor his brothers were healers. The survivors would not receive the care they desperately needed if they were taken inside the castle. Indeed, they would probably be slaughtered. He was surprised the bloodthirsty French hadn't massacred them as they swarmed through the gates. Perhaps they'd mistaken them for corpses.

"We must get these poor souls to the village."

Becket turned, puzzled to see who had spoken with such authority—and in Norman French. A diminutive nun stood inches away. He'd been too preoccupied with the horror around him to

notice her approach. Two more elderly nuns hovered nearby. His hopes rose. “*Mes soeurs*,” he said, bowing politely.

“Sister Thomasse,” one of them announced. “A Scottish plaid covers your face but you speak our tongue.”

He opened his mouth to explain, then thought better of it. There was no time to waste. “You are heaven sent, Sister,” he said. “Have you come from the village?”

“No,” she replied. “Vause allowed only three of us to leave the castle, myself, Hectorine and Marguerite.”

Her words hinted at loss. The other two nuns kept their eyes downcast. Becket didn’t doubt the Frenchman had forced some of the sisters to remain behind for his own pleasure. Bastard.

He had to admire the three reed-thin, elderly women clad in ragged habits that belonged on sturdier frames. They had clearly endured deprivations he couldn’t even imagine, yet they set about tending the survivors.

Some time later, his mind on trying to formulate the best plan of action, he noticed one of the nuns kneeling with head bowed beside a filthy, whimpering child. At first, he thought she was praying but, as he got closer, he saw she was weeping.



* * *

Marguerite felt rather than saw the officer approach. A native Cumbrian, she recognized the swath of wool covering his face as a Scottish plaid, which struck her as odd, but she knew him for the treacherous Norman he was. Two others wore the same wool. His kin perhaps? All had hair as dark as a raven’s wing, but the facial coverings rendered it impossible to discern any family resemblance. However, they and their kind were responsible for the dreadful plight of the wretched child at whose side she knelt. The waif stared into nothingness, seemingly beyond crying. Marguerite had tears

enough for the pain of starvation that held the shivering infant in its thrall, but she could not let the Norman see her anger. A nun remained detached. She must not jeopardize her disguise.

To her surprise, the man hunkered down beside the child. "Forgive me, Sister," he said softly. "This little one needs more than your prayers. We'll take her to the pavilion with the others."

Momentarily taken aback by the compassion in his deep voice, she raised her gaze, intending to scold him for his lack of faith in the power of prayer. Surely, that's how a nun would react to such a statement, though she herself had ceased believing months ago that God answered prayers. The reprimand stuck in her throat when ice blue eyes transfixed her. She averted her gaze quickly, only to be confronted with powerful thighs and long legs when he straightened.

Flustered by a peculiar longing that had nothing to do with the lack of food in her belly, she tangled her foot in the torn hem of the habit as she tried to rise.

The Norman's strong hand on her elbow kept her upright. Mumbling her thanks, she gasped when he gathered up the filthy urchin and bade her follow.



* * *

A day later, satisfied only the dead remained beneath the walls and sickened by the screams of terror echoing from the castle, Becket made his way to the pavilion. He and his brothers and a few other officers had lived in the canvas shelter for long, tedious months, but it was the closest place to take the survivors. The village would be hard pressed to provide for their needs. At least the tent would protect them from the cold March wind. Even well-clothed, decently fed, and billeted in a tent with a brazier, the Montbryces had longed for the bone-chilling winter to be over.

Upon entering the tent, Becket was almost relieved to hear moaning and wailing—a small sign of life returning. He knew frostbite became excruciatingly painful once the limbs began to thaw. He gritted his teeth when the faint sound of music drifted from the castle. The stronghold may have fallen but there was little to celebrate as far as Becket was concerned.

He'd already dispatched Adrien with a contingent of men to take the news to their father. As *comte*, Barr de Montbryce would need to prepare the people of the earldom for the reality they were now subjects of Philip of France. Becket himself had to accept he would be the first in a long line of proud Normans to inherit the Montbryce legacy as a Frenchman—provided the French king didn't confiscate the castle that had been home to the Montbryces since their Norwegian patriarch had built it.

If Philip thirsted for Montbryce, it would count for naught that Becket's family had contributed men, money, weapons and horses to the siege. It would not matter to Philip that King John's misrule had forced the Normans to switch allegiance to fight alongside a traditional enemy.

Infuriated by the possibility his family might lose everything they held dear, he removed the woolen face covering he'd worn while dealing with corpses, folded it carefully and tucked it back inside his gambeson. It was important the children in his care recognize his face.

His father would quickly relay the news of John's ouster as Duke of Normandie to the English Montbryces at Ellesmere Castle in the Welsh Marches. King John would be angry the Norman Montbryces had fought against him. He was a cruel and vindictive man on the rare occasions he wasn't angry. Decisions would have to be made to protect the family's interests and preserve its glorious heritage.

However, in the short term, Becket had lives to save and only three frail women to help him.

Orphans

Marguerite trembled. She thanked her patron saint for saving her from the carnage going on in the castle. Many of the starved villagers wouldn't survive anyway, though the Norman officer seemed determined to do what he could for them.

She'd been taken aback when he'd removed his mask. He was a handsome devil, with high cheekbones, a proud nose and a smile she'd wager had melted many a maiden's heart.

Possessing no knowledge of the healing arts, she followed Thomasse's instructions, feeling more of a burden than a helpmate. It was hardly her fault she'd led a spoiled and sheltered life.

She thought longingly of her comfortable home in Cumbria with its extensive gardens and opulent furnishings. Her beloved parents probably assumed she was dead. They wouldn't recognize the gaunt, emaciated woman she was now. Memories of a happy childhood threatened to choke her. She grieved for the orphans huddled together in the tent. The life of a peasant was hard at the best of times. These little ones had lost everything and their future looked grim. She could help to distribute food and blankets, and perhaps sing to them, just as her mother had soothed her childhood hurts with song.

The chances of getting back to England were remote. She may have escaped the citadel but was still trapped behind enemy lines now her cousin had been ousted as Duke of Normandie. She shuddered at the thought of King John's anger. He could be cruel even when he wasn't angry. England was his only remaining dominion. Heads would roll. Taxes—already punitive—would increase. John loved money above all else and the loss of Normandie would deplete his coffers.

Still, England was where she belonged. Without money, or even clothes of her own, the prospects looked bleak. Sister Thomasse had already risked too much for her and was unlikely to have the means to arrange passage to England.

She needed to find someone who had the wherewithal to get her away from Gaillard.



* * *

Two days after the surrender, Becket reluctantly deemed it relatively safe to venture inside the blackened walls. Hoping the French soldiers had slaked their blood lust, he intended to speak to Vause about the orphaned children. The Frenchman had made no effort to inquire about the survivors he'd assigned Becket to get rid of.

He took Roland and a contingent of his men with him as a precaution. The French guards initially refused to allow them to pass through the gates. Infuriated, he demanded their superior be summoned. Only then was the barrier raised.

The outlying streets were eerily deserted, the cobblestones stained red. The stench of death hung in the air, though there were no corpses in evidence.

"I wonder where Vause dumped all the bodies," he remarked to his brother.

"We can only hope some of the inhabitants have been spared," Roland replied.

Becket agreed. "It will be impossible to restore and manage a castle like Gaillard without a large workforce. King Philip will be anxious to boast of the profitable jewel he's captured."

As they neared the keep, the metallic sound of hammering reached their ears. Upon entering the inner bailey, they encountered an army of laborers busy with saws and hammers. A sweating blacksmith pounded metal at a forge set up on the perimeter, a barefooted urchin pumping the bellows.

Vause stood at the center of the activity, barking orders.

"Perhaps we've misjudged him," Becket said. "Clearly, restoration is already in full swing."

Roland bristled. "Gaillard is a Norman keep, built by a Norman king. As the ranking Norman officer, you should have been in command of its rebirth."

“Perhaps,” Becket replied. “However, while the inhabitants may resent the French occupiers, they would openly resist the rule of a Norman considered a traitor.”

As if to prove him right, most of the laborers to whom he nodded a greeting averted their gaze after snarling their disdain.

“We can’t blame them,” he said. “Life outside the walls was difficult; inside must have been hell.”

Roland clenched his jaw. “In time, our fellow Normans will come to realize they are better off being free of John Lackland.”

Becket was about to hail Vause when two young nuns exited the keep. His belly churned when the Frenchman cupped his privates and leered at them as they scurried away, heads bowed.

“Bastard,” Roland hissed.

Becket’s thoughts went to Sister Thomasse. She and Hectorine had repeatedly expressed their gratitude for his protection. Marguerite had kept herself aloof, though she’d managed to calm the children with her singing. Her sweet voice seemed at odds with her stern, gray countenance.

He had a feeling the singing eased her pain as well. A trace of the beauty she’d once been showed on what little he could see of her ashen face when she thought no one was watching.

The memory reminded him of his mission. He hailed Vause and gave his report. “Graves are being dug for the dead outside the village,” he said. “They’ll all be buried in a day or two.”

The French commander grunted, lust in his gaze as he followed the progress of the two nuns across the bailey.

Becket seethed, but recognized it would be useless to voice his outrage. “Most of the survivors have returned to the village and folks there are taking care of them.”

Vause frowned. “There were survivors?”

Becket clenched his jaw. “Some may yet succumb to the effects of frostbite and starvation.”

“Very well, keep me informed when the task is complete, then you and your men can assist with the burials here.”

Becket inhaled deeply. Normans had fought alongside the French, but they were allies, not subordinates. “That won’t be possible,” he replied. “My duty now is to return to my own castle. My father, the *Comte* de Montbryce, is getting on in years. As his heir, I have sorely neglected my duties there for too long.”

As he hoped, Vause hesitated at the reminder of his family

name. The Montbryces may now be subject to the rule of the French king but Philip would need the support of powerful families such as the Montbryces if he hoped for a peaceful transition.

“Very well,” the Frenchman agreed. “Take your army and go. We have things well in hand here.”

Becket had intended to ask permission to take the orphans with him to Montbryce. There was no future for them in Gaillard. The villagers had little enough food without having extra mouths to feed. He could provide the young ones a home and find places for them to serve at Montbryce.

Given Vause’s arrogance, he decided to simply take the children with him when he left. He doubted the Frenchman would even notice.



* * *

Aware the Norman brothers had entered Gaillard, Marguerite fretted for their return. Despite betraying their duke, they were proving to be honorable men striving to do what they could for the pathetic survivors. Few noblemen would concern themselves with the welfare of peasant children. What would happen to her and the orphans if the French commander decided to reassign the Normans?

She shuddered at the memory of the arrogant French count. Had he realized he’d allowed King John’s kinswoman to escape in the guise of a nun? The possibility churned her gut.

Relieved to see the Normans return, she thought of asking after the nuns who’d been forced to remain, but the grim resolve on their faces deterred her. She had a feeling they would rather not speak of things they had seen inside the blighted castle.

A Means Of Escape

Knees tucked to her chest, Marguerite sat in the damp grass on the banks of the Seine watching the orphans splashing about in the shallows. They'd shucked the clothing the Norman soldiers had managed to scrounge for them and were cavorting about naked. She smiled at the innocence of childhood as boys and girls played together. It gladdened her heart to see the joy of these little ones who scant days ago had been close to death. One redheaded tyke in particular had found her way into her heart, though not for any appreciation or affection she showed to Marguerite. Jacqueline had become the Norman commander's shadow ever since he had carried the child away from the carnage.

Offended by the odor of her own body, Marguerite longed to strip off the ugly habit and wade into the water. The ashes had caked into her skin and probably looked like a death mask. However, the tight coif distorting her gaunt face was an integral part of her disguise. In the absence of the coif and the ridiculous cornette, one glimpse of her long red hair would quickly betray her deception. She'd been obliged to sleep in the tight coif. A determination to lie on her back so as not to smear ash on the blinders had led to sleepless nights.

There was another reason to stay out of the water. Some of the Normans, including their commander, had stripped off their shirts. Had she and the little girls not been present, they would probably have removed every stitch of their clothing. As it was, she couldn't help but admire the chiseled chests and broad shoulders of the men who splashed about with the children as if they were their own. She'd learned their commander was a *vicomte*, a member of the powerful Montbryce family. It was easy to see now that one of the officers was his brother. The facial resemblance was striking. She knew of the wealth and influence of the English Montbryces, though she'd never had occasion to visit their stronghold in the Marches.

Montbryce was a particularly impressive specimen, a handsome man she might have been attracted to in her younger days;

however, he'd betrayed his king by allying with the French.

She shuddered at the thought of the retribution King John might exact on the English cousins of the man whose bearing and compassion she couldn't help but admire.

Not to mention his powerful physique, an inner voice taunted.

She struggled to her feet when Sister Thomasse approached, surprised by the rare smile on the elderly nun's face. "We must give thanks for the recovery of these little ones," Thomasse said. "And for the man who intends to give them a new chance at life."

Marguerite followed her gaze to the *vicomte*. "I do not understand."

"Becket de Montbryce plans to take the orphaned children with him when he returns to his castle. His family will find a place for them there."

"Becket." Marguerite whispered the name as a feeling of loss washed over her. For all her resentment of his treachery, she would miss his energy, his determination to help the helpless.

"Named for the slain Archbishop of Canterbury, now a saint, of course," Thomasse replied. "His mother and father apparently tried unsuccessfully to prevent the murder."

Marguerite struggled to recall the story. "How did they know it was going to happen?"

Thomasse made the sign of her Savior. "His mother's brother was one of the assassins. He believed he was carrying out the wishes of King Henry who wanted to be rid of Archbishop Becket."

Marguerite didn't know what to say in reply.

"But God sometimes works in mysterious ways," Thomasse continued. "The assassination brought the *vicomte's* mother and father together and they subsequently married. Out of tragedy came something beautiful."

Marguerite looked over her shoulder at the battered walls of Gaillard. "It's hard to see what beauty can come of this tragedy."

"Never abandon hope, my child," Thomasse replied. "I've convinced *milord* de Montbryce to allow you to accompany the children to his castle."

A spark of hope flared to life in Marguerite's breast, but guilt quickly extinguished it. "It is you who should go with them," she murmured.

Thomasse shook her head. "My duty lies with the people of Gaillard as they struggle to rebuild their lives. The orphans trust

you.”

It was humbling. “But you know of my resentment of the Normans’ treachery.”

Thomasse cupped her face. “Time heals all wounds. Our Lord forgave the disciple who denied him. There is nothing for you here.”

Marguerite doubted she would ever find forgiveness in her heart for the Norman nobleman who had unexpectedly provided a means of escape.



* * *

Feeling refreshed after swimming and splashing in the chilly waters of the Seine, Becket wrapped Jacqueline in a towel and hoisted her onto his shoulders. Roland chivvied the other children out to the bank.

Becket couldn’t explain the affectionate bond that had formed between him and the little girl on his shoulders, but it was a poignant reminder he had no children of his own. As heir to the Montbryce earldom, it was his duty to sire sons, but he’d avoided the subject of marriage after Paulina’s betrayal. The siege of Gaillard had postponed any further decisions in that regard. He had more or less resigned himself to Roland’s sons inheriting the title, though his brother insisted he had no interest in marrying for many years.

Becket doubted he would ever find the kind of loving relationship his parents enjoyed. For generations, the men of the Montbryce family had been unusual among the Norman nobility. They were in love with their wives. Becket would be the first not to have the so-called *curse* of the Montbryces fall upon him.

Deciding he was becoming too maudlin, he opened his ears again to the orphans’ chatter as they shivered with cold once they

were out of the water. He envied their ability to enjoy the outing despite the dire circumstances they had barely survived. He was under no illusion, however, that their experiences wouldn't have repercussions in their lives. They'd lost parents, brothers, and sisters to the agonizing cruelty of starvation.

Taking them away from Gaillard was the right thing to do. Sister Thomasse agreed. It was her suggestion Sister Marguerite accompany them. A woman's presence on the journey would be welcome, and the children seemed to trust the stern-faced nun. He personally thought Thomasse herself would have been a better traveling companion. None of the three nuns smelled too sweetly, understandable in the circumstances, but Marguerite seemed particularly reluctant to bathe.

He'd expressed concern that journeying to Montbryce would separate her from the rest of the order, but Thomasse had insisted it was God's will her fellow sister leave Gaillard. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do with her once they arrived. Perhaps suggest a bath.

Chuckling, he decided to leave that unenviable task in the capable hands of his plain-speaking, English-born mother.

As he watched Marguerite drying one of the little girls, it came to him the sisters were perhaps afraid to venture too far alone without protection. He ought to have sent scouts to find a private place for them further along the bank.



* * *

"Imagine Montbryce finding us a private place to bathe," Thomasse enthused as she sat on the bank, pulling off her shoes. "He must have more important things on his mind."

Marguerite agreed it was thoughtful of the Norman to provide three nuns a place to cleanse themselves, but she worried about

removing the habit. Distasteful though it was, it hid her true identity.

When Thomasse and Hectorine raised their skirts and waded into the water up to their knees, it became obvious that the real nuns had no intention of disrobing.

It was a relief. However, Marguerite couldn't linger if she lifted her skirts. Her legs were thin, thanks to the deprivation she'd suffered, but still bore no resemblance to the spindly, heavily veined limbs of the other two.

She followed them into the shallows, grateful to at least have the opportunity to cleanse part of her body in the bracing water.

Before they left the river, Thomasse and Hectorine scooped water to wash their faces.

Marguerite hesitated.

"Wash," Thomasse exhorted.

"The ash," Marguerite replied.

"We'll replace it with river mud."

The cold water left her face feeling wonderfully clean for the first time in months. However, she had no choice but to allow Thomasse to rub mud into her skin.

Though never considered a great beauty, she chafed at the notion of being regarded as ugly. It was foolish to wish that, just once, Montbryce could see her as she really was.

Leaving Gaillard

Having grown up riding spirited horses over the rolling moorland of her native Cumbria, Marguerite was a capable horsewoman. It therefore chafed to meekly acquiesce to traveling in a wagon with the orphans, but Thomasse's steely gaze reminded her of the part she had to play.

Bidding farewell to the nun who had saved her life was wrenching, but she could say little with Sir Becket de Montbryce and his soldiers watching.

The children were noisily excited about the journey, but fell strangely silent as they passed the walls of the citadel where they had suffered so terribly. She gathered Jacqueline to her side when tears rolled down the child's cheek. "The past is over and done," she whispered. "Time to leave it behind."

"You smell better, Sister," was the unexpected response.

She had to smile. "Thanks to the *vicomte* I was able to bathe in the river and clean my habit."

"Doesn't fit you," she said, wriggling a tiny hand into Marguerite's copious sleeve.

A shiver stole up her spine. If a child had noticed the habit wasn't hers... "I'll fill it out once I regain my appetite."

Jacqueline patted her belly. "Like me. *Milord* Becket makes sure I eat my fill."

"He's a good man," she replied. Despite her determination to hate him, she couldn't deny being impressed by his actions.



As each contingent of Norman soldiers from various strongholds across the duchy set out for home in separate directions, Becket bade farewell to the officers who'd served under him.

Impatient to be gone from Gaillard, he led the Montbryce knights away from the castle. The weight of Normandie's history still pressed heavily on his heart. "I shudder to think what the great Rollo would say of his duchy becoming subject to the King of France," he told Roland.

"For that matter," his brother replied, "our own ancestor, Ram de Montbryce, friend and ally of the Conqueror and hero of the Battle of Hastings, is probably twisting in his tomb."

"Aye," Becket agreed. "His great-grandsons have helped wrest Normandie from the dukes who have ruled it since the time of our Viking ancestor, Bryk Kriger."

Becket and Roland looked forward to returning to the home they loved. Like the majority of Norman counts, their father agreed it was the misrule of two Plantagenet kings that had left Normandie with no choice but to rebel.

"Richard the Lionhearted may have built Gaillard," Roland said, "but he spent most of his reign in the Holy Land and imposed a heavy tax burden to pay for his crusades. Celebrated for his bravery in battle, he all but forgot the lands he ruled."

Becket agreed. "John may be Richard's brother, but he has neither his charisma nor courage. Cruelty for cruelty's sake has become the hallmark of his reign. He's increased the tax burden, not for any religious purposes, but to add to his own wealth.

"I hate to contemplate what our English cousins might endure now John has only England to rape in order to satisfy his appetites for money and retaliation."

"Naught we can do about those problems," Roland replied.

"You're right. Our duty is to see our troops safely dispersed to the various Montbryce holdings that contributed them to the siege."

Once he was home, he and his family could plan the next steps in their future. The first priority would be the other estates the family controlled in Normandie. The strongholds at Alensonne, Belisle, Giroux and Domfort would have to be prepared for any attempts at confiscation by the French king. As *comte*, Becket's father was titular head of the entire clan and, eventually, they'd have to do what they could to protect their English cousin, the Earl of Ellesmere and his family. Unity had ensured the survival and

prosperity of the Anglo-Norman Montbryce family for generations.

Becket looked over his shoulder for a last glimpse of Gaillard. He would forever remember it as a symbol of his country's altered destiny.

As expected, Vause hadn't emerged from the castle to bid his Norman allies farewell. Becket no longer envied him the task of rebuilding. There was much to repair and Philip of France was an exacting taskmaster.

The probability the French commander had abused the nuns in Gaillard stuck in Becket's craw. At least Sister Thomasse and her helpers had escaped, although only Marguerite was truly out of the Frenchman's reach now they were leaving the besieged castle behind. Not that the skinny nun held any appeal for a man. She rarely looked directly at anyone and a scowl always deepened the gaunt lines of her face. However, since he'd arranged for the nuns to bathe in private, he suspected the lingering problem lay with the habit and not her person.

She must have got some sun while bathing in the river, which would explain the brownish tinge to her complexion. He had to admit it was an improvement on the gray pallor.

It puzzled him why Thomasse had insisted Marguerite go to Montbryce. She helped with the children when they camped at night but it was clear she wasn't a skilled healer. It would be a long while before they got meat back on their spindly frames but, fortunately, none of the little ones was ailing for anything—a miracle in itself.

The orphans clearly looked forward to Marguerite singing them to sleep. He doubted the children understood the English ballads, and her choice of sad love songs was surprising. What did a nun know about thwarted love and broken hearts? Becket certainly knew of those painful realities, but he refused to allow the maudlin sentimentality of the songs to remind him of Paulina's betrayal.

"There's something intriguing about Marguerite," he confessed to Roland. "On the rare occasions she has spoken to me, the accent leads me to think Norman French isn't her native language."

His brother agreed. "In fact, her mode of speech reminds me of our mother's. And she seems more comfortable singing in English."

Born in Cumbria, Hollis de Montbryce had settled in Normandie after marrying Becket's father.

One thing was for certain, their perceptive mother would know

if Marguerite was originally from England as soon as she opened her mouth.

Wolfpack

Becket had hoped to make it to Montbryce in two days but the wagons bogged down several times in deep, muddy ruts caused by unexpected warmer temperatures. Farewell briefings with other commanders dragged on as more contingents broke away from the main column to return to their respective castles.

As the shadows lengthened on the second day, the children were clearly exhausted, so Becket reluctantly decided they were still too far away from home to carry on. Traveling at night was dangerous, even with a large contingent of soldiers.

There was some grumbling among the men as they set up camp on the edge of a heavily treed forest, but Becket didn't make too much of it. He understood the longing to get home and reunite with loved ones. In any case, it would be better to approach Castle Montbryce in daylight. The magnificent fortification atop its promontory never failed to fill him with awe, though he'd been born and lived his whole life there. He looked forward to seeing the orphans' reaction to the first glimpse of their new home.

Only Sister Marguerite seemed relieved by the delay in reaching their destination. Her nervousness increased the closer they came to Montbryce. Perhaps she feared isolation once Steward Bonhomme assigned the children to foster parents.

He acknowledged the notion didn't make sense. Nuns were used to isolation and he'd assured her his father would arrange for an escort to the *Abbaye aux Dames* in Caen. The mention of the magnificent convent built by William the Conqueror always conjured memories of Becket's grandfather. The tale of Alexandre de Montbryce's birth in the historic abbey was an important part of the family lore.

Irritated that thoughts of the prickly nun occupied too much of his time, he made sure fires were lit and horses fed and watered. The cooks quickly produced a simple meal of bread, cheese and ale. No one grumbled; they'd be home on the morrow and could fill their bellies with something more substantial. A few tents were erected, but most of the men bedded down in the shelter of the

trees. The air was cool, and the cloudless sky promised a fine night.

Sister Marguerite settled the children not far from one of the campfires and bedded down with them.

The brothers sat on campstools for a while, listening to men snoring and nightjars calling in the woods. Becket filled his lungs with the crisp, clean air of his native land. "Philip may rule here now," he told Roland, as they slowly got to their feet, "but the French king will never crush our Viking spirit."

They were just getting comfortable in their sleeping furs when the howling began.



* * *

Marguerite wasn't asleep when eerie howls sent chills racing up and down her spine. Born and bred on English moors, she instantly recognized the danger posed by a wolf pack.

Shouting to each other, men hurried out of the shelter of the trees and gathered around the several campfires that were hastily rekindled. The cooks banged pots and pans.

Becket de Montbryce appeared out of the darkness to help her move the children closer to the main fire, soothing those who shivered in fear. "They won't attack," he told them. "The flames will keep them away."

Her eyes met his for a brief moment and she saw her concern mirrored there. If the pack was large and hungry enough, the fires wouldn't deter them.

She felt the loss of Becket's reassuring presence when he hurried away, yelling orders for more torches to be lit. She didn't blame him for leaving. He was responsible for the safety of hundreds of men spread over a wide area.

As the tense minutes dragged on, the howling grew louder. The whimpering orphans huddled closer to Marguerite, the flames

reflecting the terror in their eyes. She began to sing softly, hoping they couldn't detect the rasp of fear in her voice.

Trembling, she withdrew the dagger from the sheath concealed in her sleeve—just in case.

The notes of the song turned to a strangled gasp when she caught a brief glimpse of several pairs of green eyes in the nearby trees. The smell of wild animals filled her nostrils. The wolves were so close she could hear them panting. Gripping the hilt of the weapon, she rose to a squatting position, ready to defend the children if the scavengers came too close.

Suddenly, the *vicomte*, his brother and a handful of men appeared from the shadows, shouting loudly and swinging their flaming torches at the wolves lurking in the trees. Relief surged through her. Hampered by the cursed habit, she wouldn't have stood much chance of surviving an attack unscathed.

The men pursued the fleeing wolves for a short while before returning to camp.

"I think we've dissuaded them," Montbryce declared, grinning broadly.

Marguerite's original opinion of him had gradually changed. He'd already proven himself a compassionate and decisive man. Now, she knew he was no coward. He faced danger head on and she could only be grateful.



* * *

Patrolling the perimeter of the camp, Becket cursed when he caught sight of green eyes glowing in the dark near where the children huddled with Sister Marguerite. "I should have realized the wolves would target the weakest amongst us," he told Roland.

Some of his men followed him into the trees with their torches. His heartbeat slowed as an eerie silence descended again.

By the time he returned to the campfire, Marguerite had calmed the children—and secreted the lethal dagger he'd glimpsed upon rushing into the glade.

It was to be expected a woman would arm herself when faced with capture by enemy soldiers. But where would a nun procure such a weapon? The possibility Thomasse and Hectorine were similarly armed bordered on the ludicrous. And what reason could a religious have for holding on to the hidden blade once she was free of Gaillard?

It would be wise to keep a closer eye on Sister Marguerite.



* * *

Marguerite dozed fitfully for the rest of the night, waking several times to comfort some of the orphans when they cried out in fear.

She fretted about the dagger. She'd secreted it quickly, but it was possible Becket had seen it, and certainly the children had.

Trembling uncontrollably, she expected to hear the howling begin again. The only sound to disturb the silence of the night was the hooting of owls engaged in their hunt. And, of course, loud snores from men who seemed to have no difficulty falling asleep after the terrifying ordeal.

She wondered if Becket slept, or if he too remained alert.

Close to dawn, the wind picked up, rendering listening for danger even more difficult.

It came as a relief when the camp stirred in the early morning light and she was able to reassure the children that all was well.

Arrival At Montbryce

The children gaped with astonishment as the Château de Montbryce came into view. Marguerite fully understood. The enormous stone edifice dominated the surrounding countryside. An extensive grove of what looked like budding fruit trees covered one whole side of the promontory on which it stood.

It wasn't surprising the Montbryces and their soldiers were anxious to get home. She hoped the coif hid her own wonderment.

Justifiable pride shone on the *vicomte's* rugged features. It struck her for the first time how difficult it must have been for this prosperous Norman family to rebel against their hereditary duke. Her family's estate in England had so far been left untouched by cousin John's rapacious cruelty, but bonds of kinship might not deter him now Normandie was lost. Knowing John's vindictive nature, he'd probably already embarked on punitive measures against Anglo-Norman families. The Norman Montbryces must have been aware of the possibility the English branch of the family might be persecuted when they took up arms against John.

Having passed through the main gate, their progress was slowed by crowds of people crammed into the bailey to welcome the army home. They cheered the *vicomte* and his grinning brother, fondness and respect for their lord's sons evident in the broad smiles. Still mounted, the brothers leaned down to shake hands with all who clamored to be touched. Marguerite had never seen the like—noblemen willing to greet common folks with genuine warmth.

When a groom took hold of his bridle, Becket dismounted with ease, accepting hearty pats on the back with the grin still on his face. Clearly, the Normans who dwelt in this part of Normandie did not consider him a traitor.

Marguerite huddled with the children in the wagon, and thought about those Normans who'd suffered with her inside Gaillard. The nobles she'd associated with were supporters of King John but, perhaps, the common people accepted the grim reality that John had to be ousted sooner or later.

The Normans welcoming home their victorious *vicomte*

apparently preferred to take their chances with a French king not known for his benevolence rather than suffer any longer under John's misrule.

The hubbub quietened when an older man and woman emerged from the keep. The crowd parted respectfully to create a path for the pair. Marguerite had no doubt the man was Becket's father. The resemblance was striking, though the *comte's* hair had turned grey.

She wasn't looking forward to being introduced to these two. It would be a challenge to keep up the pretense of being a nun and she wasn't certain the abbey in Caen was a good idea. She dithered. Revealing her true identity might bring her closer to the goal of reaching the safety of England. On the other hand, the Montbryces might be reluctant to aid a relative of King John.

The *comtesse* was smiling now as she hugged her sons—another unusual public display of affection for a noble family—but she struck Marguerite as an intelligent and perceptive woman who wouldn't take kindly to deception.



* * *

Becket had worried they might not receive a warm welcome home but, clearly, the people of Montbryce were glad to be free of King John. He could only hope they wouldn't soon regret coming under the yoke of Philip of France. He trusted his father's assumption was right—Philip would need to foster goodwill among the powerful families of Normandie. The Normans had ousted John. Philip should pay heed to the Northmen's hatred of tyranny.

His parents were aging. The siege had necessitated his being away from home for months at a time. He was glad to see them looking hale.

When his smiling mother linked her arm with his, he hesitated to escort her inside. He'd sent Adrien ahead with word of the

children's arrival but it would be remiss not to introduce Sister Marguerite. What to say?

She's a nun who carries a lethal weapon. Her mode of speech reminds me of yours.

He patted his mother's arm before leaving her to assist Marguerite down from the wagon. As he expected, his hands almost spanned her thin waist. He also wasn't surprised when she averted her gaze as he lifted her. Seeing her face clearly for the first time shocked him. Perhaps the journey had brought color to the pasty cheeks. Mayhap the army cook's food had put meat on her bones. Whatever the cause, Sister Marguerite might be emaciated, but she was much younger than he'd thought—and those eyes as green as emeralds!

She put her hands on his shoulders and blushed fiercely. His body's unexpected and shameful reaction sent gooseflesh rippling down his spine—lusting for a nun wasn't the behavior of a noble knight.

More alarming was his inability to take his hands off her as she clung to his shoulders, even when her feet were firmly on the cobblestones. He wished she would look him in the eye, but was gobsmacked to see tears welling when she raised her quivering chin. "Don't be afraid," he whispered. "The worst is over."

She pursed her lips, struggling not to cry. "Thank you," she murmured as she turned away.



* * *

Marguerite couldn't understand why she was crying. Perhaps her tears were caused by immense relief. She'd reached a place of safety after living for months in a castle under siege.

Was her intense fear of starvation finally loosening its grip?

England was still a long way from Montbryce, her journey far

from over.

When Becket put his big hands on her for the first time, she experienced a peculiar longing, even stirrings of wanton sensations in unmentionable places. The broad shoulders she gripped were so strong, so dependable.

Such feelings for a man who'd betrayed his duke and king were unforgivable. He might be more compassionate and courageous than she'd expected, but that didn't excuse his treachery, nor that of his family.

She was still in enemy territory and would do well to remember it. The cheering crowd around her would turn nasty if they discovered she was King John's cousin.

Becket's smiling parents might cast her out. Had she seen regard in his blue gaze when she'd finally plucked up the courage to look into his eyes? Or was it something more? Something akin to the sexual stirrings she herself felt? Or, perhaps, he'd finally seen through her disguise.

Her emotions were out of control, a state of affairs she wasn't used to, and could not allow. The cursed habit and coif didn't help matters. The sooner she was rid of them, the better. But she had no other clothing, and if she was to continue the disguise...

Unable to deal with the confusion in her beleaguered heart, she turned away and steeled herself to meet Becket's parents.



* * *

Becket should feel relieved to be home, yet couldn't rid himself of a vague sense of impending doom.

Sister Marguerite wasn't the first guest he'd brought to Montbryce, but the joyful anticipation he always felt was missing.

Having seen her face clearly, he was more certain than ever she wasn't who or what she claimed to be. Or was he simply too

suspicious of every woman who crossed his path? And how was it an unfriendly nun could rouse his male interest?

Perhaps, once he settled back into the familiar routines, things would become clearer.

A bath and a good night's sleep in his own chamber was what he needed. Strangely, the prospect of his lonely bed brought no solace as he prepared to introduce Marguerite.

In Hot Water

Normally, Becket wouldn't hesitate to put his hand on a woman's elbow to guide her to meet his parents. It was the act of a gentleman, but such a thing might not be appropriate in the circumstances. Marguerite may not welcome his hands on her body. She was a nun after all. Touching her again was not the best thing to do. He still didn't have his unwelcome arousal under control, a state of affairs he hadn't allowed since Paulina's betrayal.

He was a decisive man. His confusion when Marguerite came face to face with his parents bothered him. "Papa, *Maman*, may I introduce Sister Marguerite...er...from Gaillard. She has been caring for the orphans."

His father bent his head politely before clasping Marguerite's hands. "God bless you, Sister. I am *Comte* Barr de Montbryce, and I welcome you."

Marguerite clung to his hands as she bobbed a curtsy.

As Becket expected, his mother kissed their guest on each cheek and gave her a hug, undeterred by the stiff wings of the coif. "Welcome, Sister. I am Lady Hollis, mother to Becket, Roland and Adrien. You must be strong to have survived the ordeal of the siege. I forget, which order of nuns resides at Gaillard?"

"Er...the Little Sisters...of Saint Cuthbert," Marguerite replied.

"Of course," his mother answered with a smile. "I expect the first thing you'd like is a hot bath."

Becket remained in the bailey as his chatty mother led Marguerite inside his home. His emotions were mixed. He was strangely happy to have her as a guest in the home he loved, though she seemed to have lapsed into a trance. Apparently, arriving at Montbryce had turned the stern, sometimes sharp-tongued nun into a weeping wraith who curtsied, for God's sake. But he finally recognized, thanks to his mother's seemingly innocent question, that Marguerite was not a nun. "No order of nuns residing in the furthest reaches of Normandie would be dedicated to a Northumbrian saint—a monk at that," he muttered to Roland.

His brother arched his brows. "My thoughts exactly."

Their father clamped his hands on their shoulders, drawing Becket out of his suspicious thoughts. “Bonhomme will see to the children. They might feel less afraid if you boys help with the task.”

Glad of the distraction, Becket lifted Jacqueline from the wagon and hoisted the laughing child into her favorite position on his shoulders. “Now, let’s see what Steward Bonhomme has for us to eat.”

Broad smiles chased away the apprehension lingering on many young faces as Bonhomme led the procession into the keep.



* * *

“I should be with the children,” Marguerite protested as the countess ushered her into an opulent guest chamber. Her exhausted body and beleaguered spirit urged her to crawl into the inviting bed. Servants were pouring pails of steaming hot water into a large bathtub set in one corner. The sight robbed her of breath.

However, Lady Hollis de Montbryce was a clever woman who may already suspect Marguerite wasn’t what she claimed to be. The question about the order of nuns she supposedly served had caught her off guard. After two long years in Gaillard, she didn’t know anything about the nuns who resided there. She’d attended mass every day but spared no thought for the religious women who were suffering as much as she. When the elderly priest became so weak he could hardly stand at the altar, nuns had stood either side of him, literally keeping him upright as he celebrated the Eucharist.

Even worse, Marguerite got the feeling from Lady Hollis’ accent that her roots lay not far from her own home in Cumbria. She searched her memory for the names of the knights who had assassinated Archbishop Becket more than thirty years before at the behest of King Henry. Thomasse had told her Lady Hollis was sister to one of them. Had any of the four hailed from Cumbria?

“Our steward can take care of the little ones,” Becket’s mother assured her. “He has arranged good foster homes.”

“Still...”

“You have done your duty,” the countess insisted. “Now, it’s time to take care of yourself. You look exhausted, and no wonder after what you’ve experienced. Don’t be offended, but I think we should burn your habit.”

“But...”

“While you are bathing, my ladies will bring suitable clothes—they’ll have to suffice until we can procure another habit.”

Confusion as to the best response dulled Marguerite’s wits. She didn’t have the energy to argue. She hated the malodorous habit so much she would gladly be the one to toss it into the flames. The prospect of luxuriating in hot water was too strong to resist. “Thank you, my lady,” she murmured.

“Alys will come to help you disrobe, and she’ll wash your hair if you wish.”

A voice in the back of Marguerite’s mind whispered that the countess’ every word was somehow a test, but she was tired of the lies. “That would be lovely,” she replied.



* * *

Assured that the orphans were being well taken care of, Becket made straight for his own chamber. As he’d hoped, his valet was waiting to help him remove his armor. “I can’t wait to sleep in my own bed,” he told Robert.

“A hot bath awaits in the garderobe, *milord*. Then you can sleep if you wish.”

Stripped to his shirt and leggings, Becket couldn’t resist. “Just five minutes,” he said, crawling to lie on his back looking up into the rafters. Not for the first time, he felt the lack of a partner to

share the big bed. A warrior coming home from war should find a warm welcome in the arms of a loving wife. For years, he'd trusted Paulina would be that faithful mate, but then...

"The water is getting cold," Robert reminded him.

Lured by the prospect of being clean again, Becket yanked his shirt over his head and shoved the leggings off his hips. "Lead on," he quipped.

As he eased his tired body into the hot water, his mind conjured an unwelcome image of Marguerite doing the same thing in a nearby chamber. She'd have removed the habit, and the coif and veil. He wondered about the color of her hair. While Robert scrubbed his back, he clasped his arms around bent knees and confessed inwardly he'd been tempted to explore above her waist when he'd lifted her down from the cart.

Were such temptations sinful if the woman wasn't a nun? She wasn't even attractive, yet his thoughts wandered constantly in her direction. And, if she wasn't a religious, then who was she?

Gullible Fool

Marguerite was confident Alys hadn't noticed the dagger she'd hurriedly secreted beneath the straw mattress while disrobing.

"You have beautiful hair," the maid gushed. "I always thought nuns had to cut their hair short."

Marguerite knew there was no malice or insinuation in the girl's observation. It was probably true nuns kept their hair cropped short. She was only too aware of how uncomfortable long hair was under the confines of a tight coif and heavy cornette. She'd come close to shrieking her joy when the hateful starched monstrosities were removed.

However, the waist-length hair couldn't be hidden, even if Alys braided it, as promised.

She feigned disinterest in the second maid who appeared and gathered up the habit, though an urge to cheer welled up in her throat.

Immersed in the consoling warmth of the water, she wondered if Becket was bathing in a nearby chamber. He probably looked like a Greek god without his clothes. She scoffed aloud at her own folly. "Is Sir Becket married?" she asked, again cursing her apparent determination to ask forbidden questions.

"No," Alys replied. "He was betrothed to Lady Paulina for the longest time, but..."

A maelstrom of possibilities swirled in Marguerite's mind. Had this unknown woman died? Ended the betrothal? What? And why did she care if Becket's heart had been broken?

Clearly, the maid thought better of voicing whatever it was she was about to reveal.

Marguerite squeezed her eyes shut when Alys poured water over her head, opening them again while the maid swathed her hair in a towel. She accepted the girl's help to step out of the bath, acknowledging it was wonderful to be waited on again. She relished the scent of lavender lingering on her body from the perfumed soap.

"You poor thing," Alys lamented as she rubbed Marguerite's thin

frame dry with a luxurious towel whose soft texture tempted her to hug it to her body. “All skin and bones. I can’t imagine the horrors you must have endured.”

Marguerite didn’t want to revisit those dark days. They were behind her. Death had stalked her for months. Thomasse had given her a second chance and she had a duty to live a full and meaningful life. She admitted inwardly she wanted a loving husband and a family. Cousin John had denied her that contentment with his unwarranted refusal to approve marriage to any of the men who’d asked for her hand. If she could get home to England, her parents would find a worthy man—one loyal to his king. A husband John couldn’t fail to approve.

Her momentary optimism faltered when she espied the gowns laid out on the bed. All were of fine quality, expertly sewn. The necklines were high, with no hint of décolletage. However, the voluminous habit had hidden her figure. The sleeves of the new gowns were too narrow to conceal the dagger. She’d have to contrive some alternative way to secure it to her body. The bodices would cling to every curve, especially to the one part of her body that seemed not to have suffered from deprivation. She’d inherited her mother’s generous breasts and there’d be no hiding them now.



* * *

Feeling like a new man after bathing and dressing in his favorite tunic and leggings, Becket made his way to his father’s solar. His suspicions about Marguerite were troubling and he’d always depended on his parents’ insights when faced with a dilemma.

Roland and Adrien had arrived before him. He couldn’t quite fathom why that bothered him. There’d never been any secrets between him and his siblings, though he acknowledged inwardly the relationship had changed after Paulina’s departure. Roland, and

even the shy Adrien, were at ease around women, whereas he...

His mother rose from her chair by the hearth and hugged him again, this time allowing the tears she hadn't shed in the bailey. "I prayed every day for your safe return," she told him, "and I'm proud you decided to bring those poor children."

"They've lost everything," he replied. "Here, they'll be taken care of and given a new start."

"They will," she assured him. "Bonhomme is very excited about the project. He has chosen good families to foster the orphans."

"What are your thoughts now the siege is over?" his father asked after they clasped arms and embraced.

Becket perched on the wide arm of his mother's chair. "My feelings are mixed. We had to be rid of King John, but Philip of France could turn out to be just as inept."

His father regained his seat and steepled his fingers. "We have to make him understand he'll need our help if he wants to inherit a peaceful duchy."

Roland nodded. "It's to our advantage all the Norman *comtes* are united."

"My biggest concern," his father confessed, "is what's going to happen in England."

"Or may already be happening," Adrien said. "John won't waste time exacting revenge."

"And higher taxes," his father added. "But the latest news from Ellesmere indicated our cousins have received no word of retaliatory measures. We sent a return message via the pigeon relay to let them know you were all safe."

"Hopefully, John will remember the English Montbryces supported his father and helped Henry secure the throne," Becket remarked.

His mother snorted. "You forget Henry's sons rebelled against him more than once, and John laughs in the face of obligations. He has no honor."

She put a hand on Becket's knee. "Speaking of England, I believe I detect a trace of Cumbria in Marguerite's speech."

He let out a long, slow breath. "I think you are correct. I noticed it too."

"But there's something else, isn't there?" his mother asked.

Becket shrugged. "You suspect the same thing I do. She isn't a nun."

Roland and Adrien nodded their agreement.

A servant entered with tumblers of apple brandy, serving first his mother, then his father, then the brothers. His father raised his tumbler. "To new beginnings. Drink up, then tell us how she managed to escape Gaillard."

Becket took a sip of his brandy. "I've dreamed of tasting this once I got home." He downed the rest in one gulp before beginning the tale of meeting Marguerite. As he related the details, he wondered why he hadn't realized she wasn't what she appeared to be. "I suppose I was too preoccupied with the aftermath of the siege and the plight of the wretches outside the walls."

"And your dislike of the French commander," Roland added.

"Alys inadvertently remarked that Marguerite has hair down to her waist," his mother said. "That alone tells me she isn't a religious."

Becket cringed. "The starched coif and ridiculous headgear looked uncomfortable enough without masses of hair beneath it."

"Something else Alys said makes me believe she isn't elderly."

Becket had realized as much after the first close glimpse of her face. He was beginning to think he'd been taken in too easily by Marguerite's disguise.

"She has the breasts of a young woman."

When Roland's eyes lit up, Becket recognized he'd been a gullible fool. Breasts were usually the first thing he noticed! He began to wonder why Sister Thomasse had been willing to take the risk of saving Marguerite if she wasn't a nun.

Web Of Lies

Garbed in one of the borrowed gowns, Marguerite perched on the edge of the bed, awaiting her fate. Alys had advised that someone would come to escort her to the *comte's* solar.

As she'd feared, the slightly too small bodice clung to her breasts, leaving nothing to the imagination. She seemed incapable of controlling nipples that insisted on pouting against the muslin.

It was too much to hope the maid who'd helped her bathe hadn't subsequently reported to her mistress. The sweet girl wasn't a malicious gossip, but she'd been mightily impressed with Marguerite's hair. It was inevitable she would have remarked on it to the *comtesse*.

She likely wouldn't have to confess her deception. No doubt the Montbryces had already figured it out. Becket would be angry, yet she perversely hoped he would be the one who came to confront her.

Gripping the mattress, she reminded herself that, no matter what happened, she must never reveal her kinship with John. Getting to England depended on the goodwill of the treacherous Montbryces.



* * *

Becket clenched his jaw and fisted his hands. He took several deep breaths before rapping on the door of the guest chamber. He'd never been ruled by anger, even after Paulina's departure. Marguerite couldn't be blamed for being desperate to leave Gaillard. He'd wager few women survived the French soldiers'

rapacious appetite for blood and plunder. His own gullibility was tying his gut in knots. He should have confronted her about the dagger as soon as he saw it.

When he entered the chamber, his mouth fell open. Marguerite was standing tall, spine rigid, as he might have expected. She'd already proven herself courageous.

He didn't expect to see a young woman with flaming red hair and a body that would make any man drool. Her face, hips and shoulders were still too thin, but there could be no doubt she wasn't elderly. He must have been blind not to notice the copious globes. His treacherous cock certainly noticed them now, but at least he need no longer feel guilty about his body's reaction.

"I'm not a nun," she said, lifting her chin.

He searched her face for any sign of regret or apology, not truly surprised when he detected nothing of the sort. Fists tightly clenched at her sides were the only indication of nervousness.

"So I see," he replied, determined not to ask for an explanation. She clearly didn't think she was obliged to provide one. "Is Marguerite even your real name?"

"Marguerite d'Aigremont. I'm from Cumbria, as your mother has probably already guessed."

"How did you come to be in Gaillard?"

She blinked for the first time and he knew whatever came next would be a lie.



* * *

"I traveled to Gaillard to be betrothed," Marguerite replied, hoping she could keep as close to the truth as possible. She'd never been adept at lying and Becket de Montbryce threw her off balance.

The scowl did not leave his face. "To whom?"

"When I was a child, my parents arranged a betrothal." It was

the truth, although Sir Blaise de Fillion had been killed crusading with King Richard. A sad waste of a young life, though she had met the sixteen-year-old only once when she was ten.

She squirmed inwardly, dismayed to have already embarked on a complicated set of half-truths.

“I repeat, to whom?”

She’d been promised many times, only to have the arrangements scotched by her king. Her brother once remarked that perhaps John wanted her for his mistress, a disgusting possibility that made her ill for weeks afterwards. The prospect of incurring the wrath of John’s wife, the intimidating and volatile Isabella of Angoulême, was terrifying.

It was difficult to recall the names of men she’d never met and Montbryce would be familiar with any Norman she named. “A French nobleman of good family.”

“French?” he exclaimed. “That seems an odd choice for an English noblewoman.”

Confused, she compounded her mistake. “Gaillard was deemed to be the safest place to finalize matters.”

Montbryce snorted. “Clearly, that turned out to be a false assumption.”

“One of many I’ve made,” she replied, wishing the words unsaid when he arched his brow. She preferred his disdain to his curiosity. Then he might cease the interrogation. She needed this man’s support if she was ever to escape to England.

“Of all the noblewomen trapped inside the citadel, why did Thomasse choose to rescue you?”

It was the one question she’d hoped he wouldn’t ask. Thomasse had known the French would execute or imprison a woman with blood ties to King John. The Montbryces would judge her because of that kinship, perhaps turn her over to the French king. John would refuse to pay ransom, of that she was mind-numbingly certain. He loved money more than he loved his cousin. John’s own mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, had spent years as a prisoner of her husband, the late Henry II. Did the same fate await her?

Marguerite therefore uttered the biggest lie of all. “When my betrothed failed to materialize, I decided to join the sisterhood.” Montbryce’s frown deepened, prompting her tongue to run away with itself. “Thomasse wanted me to live so I could become a bride of Christ.”

Montbryce narrowed his eyes. "Yet, you do not even know the name of the religious order you wish to join."

She had no answer. He knew her for the liar she was. For years, she had made excuses for John. A king had to be firm, had to make sure his subjects knew his power was absolute. But she had never resented her kinship with him more than at this moment. It had forced her into a web of lies uttered to an honest man who had brought her safely out of the darkness of Gaillard. She owed Montbryce her life but all she had to offer in return was deceit.

The First Test

Becket supposed he should pity Marguerite. She'd endured an ordeal that would have cost most women their lives. Indeed, many like her had probably perished during the siege. She'd been forced to resort to subterfuge in order to escape after the castle's surrender, and was now caught in a web of lies. The regret in her eyes led him to believe she was uncomfortable with the untruths. So, why perpetuate them? What was she afraid of?

To add to his frustration, he found himself attracted to the body she'd hidden beneath the shabby, voluminous robe and starched coif.

On the one hand, he wanted to get to know her; on the other, he wished it were still possible to ship her off to the abbey in Caen. Then, he'd be rid of the quandary of what to do with her. "My parents are expecting you in their solar," he announced curtly.

"Of course," she replied meekly.

"Hopefully, they'll have some idea of what to do with you. I admit I am at a loss."

"My parents probably think I am dead. I'd like to get back to England," she said.

For some unfathomable reason, he felt obliged to naysay that possibility. "Members of my family regularly travel between England and Normandie," he said. "However, it might not be wise for a Norman Montbryce to be seen in England at the moment."

She lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders. Her disapproval of the Norman ouster of King John was plain to see. Of course, she wasn't a Norman, so how could she understand? Although, if she'd lived in England, she must know of King John's misrule.

Reluctantly, he proffered his arm. "Shall we?"

She nodded and placed her hand on his arm. He filled his nostrils with the aroma of lavender—a definite improvement, except that the perfume played havoc with his senses.

They walked the hallways in a silence broken only by the swish of her skirts and the echo of his boot heels. Many questions plagued

him, but he seemed unable to give voice to any of them. The woman on his arm was an enigma, and he didn't like mysteries. He'd thought he knew Paulina but, as it turned out, he hadn't known her at all.

As they entered his parents' solar, he decided to leave matters in their wiser hands.



* * *

Marguerite dropped into a full curtsy upon entering the *comte's* solar. Known in her own circle as a witty and intelligent conversationalist, she'd been unable to speak a single word to Becket de Montbryce as they'd walked, though there were many things she ought to say to him. He likely expected an abject apology for her deception—something she could never give. She didn't know his true opinion, and that made her nervous.

But her fate would ultimately depend on the *comte*—and his perceptive wife.

"Please rise, Lady Marguerite," Becket's father said as he and his wife stood.

Afraid her trembling legs would buckle if she attempted to stand up straight, she was beyond grateful when Becket held out a hand to assist her. She clung to his strength like a shipwreck survivor clings to driftwood, unable to let go once she was upright. She thought he might withdraw his hand, but he didn't. Despite his obvious annoyance, he'd sensed she needed his support.

"Marguerite d'Aigremont is from Cumbria, *Maman*," he announced.

"I knew I was right," the *comtesse* replied with a gleeful smile.

She offered no kiss, nor any gesture of welcome to a fellow countrywoman. However, Marguerite took heart that she heard no censure in her hostess's words. "My father is Baron Ravenglass," she

said.

“And I’m from Burgh-by-Sands, near Carlisle,” Lady Hollis explained. “I’m afraid I don’t know of Aigremont, and it’s been many a year since I was in Cumbria.”

Marguerite breathed more easily. The Montbryces apparently weren’t familiar with the Cumbrian nobility. So far, there’d been no hint of hostility, except for the unreadable expression on the face of Becket’s younger brother. Adrien stood like a statue. The one called Roland couldn’t seem to take his eyes off her breasts. “Aigremont is much further south, my lady, near the coast,” she explained.

A disconcerting silence ensued. The *comte* had narrowed his eyes and seemed to be deciding what to do with her. She wished they would invite her to sit. Only Becket’s hand was preventing her from swaying. Indeed, she would feel more capable of coping with the situation if everyone would be seated.

A servant entered carrying a tray of tumblers.

“Ah, good,” the *comte* declared. “Why don’t we all take a seat and enjoy a refreshment while we talk?”

Relief swept over Marguerite. It was unlikely she’d be treated like a guest if she was to be cast into the dungeon.

She missed the anchor of Becket’s hand when he escorted her to an upholstered chair, then went to stand by the fire, one foot resting on the stone hearth. She could see him out of the corner of her eye, but his parents sat directly across from her. Clearly, their son intended to watch her as the interview progressed. She swallowed hard, trying to ignore the winged creatures fluttering in her belly.

She accepted a tumbler from the tray when it was offered. A fruity aroma stole up her nostrils.

“Have you tasted our famous apple brandy before?” the *comte* asked.

Marguerite shook her head.

“I warn you,” the *comtesse* said. “It’s an acquired taste. It stole my breath away the first time I took a sip but now I love it.”

Becket cleared his throat. “Our family has been making apple wines and brandy since our Viking ancestor brought apple seeds and cuttings from Norway,” he explained, his voice full of pride. “I know it’s Lent, but we often make an exception for our brandy.” He winked. “On medicinal grounds, of course.”

Marguerite hesitated. The wink took her off guard and this was

clearly a test. She enjoyed a glass of good wine, but English ladies of noble birth avoided distilled spirits. She couldn't recall the last time she'd drunk wine inside Gaillard. Even the priest had expressed a hope Jesus might turn water into wine at the eucharist but, all too soon, there hadn't even been water to fill the cup of Christ's blood.

She decided to follow the *comtesse's* advice and take only a sip. Nevertheless, a choking cough erupted when the fiery liquid burned her throat and the fumes stole up her nose.

She blinked away welling tears, astonished to see all the Montbryces grinning broadly, even Becket and Adrien. "I'm sorry," she rasped.

"Don't be," Becket replied. "You passed the test. If our brandy doesn't take away a lady's breath the first time she tries it, there's something amiss with the brandy, or the lady."

Relieved she'd passed the first test, Marguerite took another sip in order to brace herself for the next hurdle.

Isolation

Becket was tempted to pat Marguerite on the back when a coughing fit seized her, as he'd done years ago when Paulina nigh on choked on the brandy. On this occasion, he kept his hands to himself. Marguerite's pride might lead her to resent his touch and he didn't want her to think his anger had softened. It was bad enough he'd allowed her to cling to him when she first entered the room. He pitied her situation, but such feelings had to be stifled. She'd deceived him. Lies and falsehoods wouldn't be permitted to destroy him a second time. The information about her sire might be true, but there was still much they didn't know about her.

He watched her slowly acquire a taste for the brandy as she sipped. Paulina had refused to even finish her first tumbler. She'd wrinkled her nose in disgust whenever it was served. He should have realized then she would never make a suitable *Comtesse* de Montbryce.

"Did your husband die in Gaillard?" his father asked.

Marguerite glanced guiltily at Becket before answering. The lies were about to continue. "*Non*, as I explained to the *vicomte*, I was led to believe my betrothed would meet me there, but..."

"Forgive me," his mother interrupted, "you seem past the age when most women marry."

"*Oui*," she agreed sadly, fidgeting with the empty tumbler, "and deprivation has made me look older than I am."

Becket couldn't help himself. He posed the question no gentleman ever asked a lady. "And how old are you?"

Roland snorted.

The blush wrought by the brandy drained from her face. She stared at the tumbler. "Three and twenty, my lord."

Becket clenched his jaw. For sennights, he'd thought he was dealing with a woman well past the age of fifty.

His mother spoke before he had a chance to vent his anger. "Good food will soon put meat on your bones. We have that in abundance at Montbryce."

"You are more than generous, my lady," Marguerite replied.

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Steward Bonhomme. "You sent for me, my lord *comte*?"

"We're anxious to hear how the children are faring," Becket's father replied.

"They are a little unsure, as we expected."

"They'll soon adapt," Marguerite said, to everyone's surprise. "They are more resilient than adults."

His mother nodded. "That's often true. And they will settle in quickly with your help. My son tells me you took good care of them after the siege."

Becket bristled. He preferred she not be aware he'd said anything positive about her.

"I hear you want to return to England, but there will be no possibility of anyone from our family crossing the Narrow Sea for a while," his father added. "And we cannot allow you to make the journey alone. Watching over the children's welfare will give you a purpose while you wait to return to England. It will also relieve Bonhomme of some of the responsibility."

Bonhomme looked as irritated as Becket felt. He wasn't looking forward to spending months listening to the woman's lies.

"Becket," his mother said, "I suggest you take Marguerite to meet with the children. She can perhaps explain her new identity to them."



* * *

Roland appeared crestfallen he hadn't been asked to accompany her, whereas the resentment emanating from Becket was almost palpable. Marguerite didn't blame him. Having watched his easy manner with the children, she understood his anger—she had deceived them as well as him.

Ever the gentleman, he offered his arm as they left the solar,

though she was certain he would prefer not to touch her.

She'd never felt more isolated. Inside Gaillard, she'd spent her days surrounded by like-minded people of equal rank. Everyone trapped in that blighted citadel came to have fear and despair in common.

At Montbryce, she was alone with the secret of her true identity. The prospect of spending months in a strained relationship with Becket de Montbryce loomed like a gathering storm. He was an affable, good-natured man. Aloofness was against his nature. She had to try to smooth his path in order to make things easier for herself. If they had to dwell in close proximity, they may as well be civil to each other. "I know the children will be happy here," she tried.

"Your new appearance will confuse them," he replied curtly.

Resisting the urge to smile, she made no reply. It was apparent her appearance had confused him. However, she mustn't read too much into his reaction when he'd first set eyes on her *sans* habit. Her mother had assured her men couldn't help themselves when it came to large breasts. The notion Becket found her attractive was too ludicrous to contemplate. He was a handsome man who probably had many beautiful women at his beck and call. So why wasn't he married?



* * *

Becket's spirits lifted when they entered the hall. Jacqueline squealed her delight and ran to him. As he hoisted her atop his shoulders, the other orphans clustered around his legs. He'd always found it easy to relate to children born and raised in Montbryce, but these little ones were special. In a way, they were his children and he felt responsible for them.

When the hubbub died down, he noticed everyone eyeing

Marguerite curiously. Clearly, no one recognized the nun who'd accompanied them from Gaillard.

She looked forlorn and apprehensive standing alone; it would be wrong to prolong her agony. "Will you not greet the lady who sang you to sleep after you were rescued, and protected you from wolves on the journey?"

The children gaped.

Marguerite fidgeted with her sleeves. "I'm happy to see you all so well and to meet your foster parents," she said nervously.

Becket feared she was having difficulty coming up with the right words. "Lady Marguerite d'Aigremont isn't a nun," he said. "She donned the disguise in order to escape from the castle."

He was glad to see several foster mothers nod in understanding. One goodwife curtsied as she stepped forward. "It was a courageous thing to do, my lady, and the children loved your singing."

Slowly but surely, the little ones gathered around her as she knelt to greet them. It was evident from her tears she cared about them. Becket supposed they had that much in common.

Only Jacqueline seemed reluctant to loosen her hold on his hair and be let down from her perch atop his shoulders.

The Dagger

Over the course of the many disappointments caused by King John's lack of regard for her future, Marguerite had learned to lower her expectations. As a young girl, she'd been excited by the very notion of being betrothed; John's consistent refusal to grant permission for her to marry cut deep, although she could barely remember most of the men's names.

She gradually became aware she was the object of ridicule among the Cumbrian nobility—the woman who'd been betrothed more times than anyone in recent history. As a result, she'd cloaked herself in a mantle of disdain. Isolated in Aigremont, she abandoned dreams of a loving husband and family. Reconciled to spinsterhood, she had nevertheless undertaken the ill-fated trek to Gaillard when John dangled the possibility of a betrothal that might actually come to fruition. Of course, when a king summons, and sends an armed escort...

She understood now that John must have known the French would besiege Gaillard, yet he'd failed to send his army to relieve the siege.

Kneeling amid the orphans who'd suffered worse torments even than those trapped inside the castle walls, she couldn't stem humble tears. Their smiling faces proved they were determined to leave the past behind. If only she possessed their innocent belief things would get better.

It was too late for her to find happiness, but she could devote her efforts to improving their lives. They would be her family for the time she was obliged to remain at Montbryce.



* * *

Notwithstanding the ordeal she'd undergone in Gaillard, Becket sensed Marguerite wasn't a happy person. She'd spoken of her parents with affection, which led him to believe the unhappiness must stem from events that had befallen her during her adult life.

The smile she bestowed upon the orphans knocked him off balance. It lit up her face, betraying a beauty she'd hidden well behind the confining coif.

He found himself wishing he could see that smile more often, then angrily shoved the ludicrous sentimentality aside. This was just one more example of her attempts to manipulate the situation.

Her joy seemed genuine, but she'd duped him before. Still, he saw no harm in allowing her access to the orphans while she was in his home. They were clearly happy to see her, all except Jacqueline who clung to him even after he lifted her from his shoulders.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered, hunkering down beside the child. "Marguerite won't hurt you."

She shook her head. "She has a dagger."

Once again, he cursed himself for a fool. He'd forgotten all about the weapon.



* * *

Saddened by Jacqueline's obvious reluctance to come near her, Marguerite walked slowly to where the little girl stood with Montbryce. "I hope we can still be friends," she said, perplexed when the child cowered closer to her protector's leg.

"She's afraid," Montbryce explained.

Marguerite didn't understand. "Of me?"

"Of your dagger," the Norman replied.

It shouldn't have come as a surprise Jacqueline knew of the

weapon. She'd openly wielded it in preparation for the wolves' attack.

Nevertheless, she dithered. With Alys fussing over sewing tucks into the gowns, there hadn't been an opportunity to secrete the dagger on her person. It remained hidden under the mattress.

Her father had insisted she be armed with her grandfather's dagger for the journey to Gaillard. He hadn't placed much faith in the royal escort provided by John—with good reason, as it turned out. To a man, they'd fled Gaillard at the first sign of invading French troops.

Surrendering a family heirloom was out of the question. "I no longer have it," she lied. "It seemed unnecessary once we came in sight of the castle."

Montbryce narrowed his eyes, clearly suspicious. "What did you do with it?"

"I threw it in the lake we passed. I thought you would find it odd if you discovered I was carrying a weapon. Nuns don't usually..."

Aware her babbling was likely causing him to doubt her more, she opened her arms wide, determined to meet his steely glare. "It's not on my person, I can assure you."

Something peculiar happened as he raked his gaze over her from head to toe. She was no stranger to men ogling her breasts but she'd never had a man study her so intently. However, the strange tingling in her nipples and the warmth blossoming in a very private place had nothing to do with the weapon she sought to protect. His gaze lingered a little too long on her breasts before traveling to her hips. His nostrils flared. He licked his lips. His eyes betrayed male interest in her female form, not the weapon she might have concealed.

A lunatic desire welled up inside—she craved his big hands on her breasts, her hips, her womanhood—everywhere. It was on the tip of her tongue to suggest he carry out a search of her person.

The trance was broken when he cleared his throat and turned his attention back to Jacqueline.

Mouth dry, heart beating too fast, she lowered her arms, ashamed she'd wantonly basked in every moment of his lustful perusal.



* * *

“There,” Becket told Jacqueline. “You see. Nothing to be afraid of.”

The child nodded, but he could see from her frown she wasn’t any more convinced than he was that Marguerite had thrown away the weapon.

Her constant lies irked him, but he raged inwardly at his own inability to control his male urges when she was near. He wasn’t sure what it was about Marguerite that his cock found so inspiring. She was too skinny, too pale and not trustworthy. True, she had impressive breasts, and what man wouldn’t want to waken every morning tangled in the glorious red tresses?

However, he still knew nothing about her, other than where she hailed from. The tale about meeting a betrothed had a ring of truth, but why would a woman travel all that way through disputed territory for a betrothal? Who had escorted her? And why Gaillard? Surely there were plenty of English noblemen who would gladly wed a woman like Marguerite. She’d probably had a very appealing figure before the rigors of the siege took their toll. *Dieu*, she still held a certain allure, as his treacherous cock had noticed.

If he wasn’t mistaken, he’d wager she’d enjoyed his perusal. He was no stranger to the tantalizing aroma of female arousal.

She was courageous, he’d give her that. It must have taken nerve to risk discovery, although the alternative...

He still didn’t understand why Thomasse had also taken an enormous risk and agreed to the disguise. Why had she been complicit in Marguerite’s escape, especially when some of her fellow nuns hadn’t been allowed to leave Gaillard?

Frustrated by too many questions with no answers, and an erection that stubbornly refused to abate, he took his leave, muttering something incoherent about neglecting his duties.

Homecoming

During the evening meal in the castle's Great Hall, Marguerite appreciated the *comtesse's* attempts to make conversation about Cumbria. However, despite the Lenten season, the place was crowded with local people clearly jubilant to welcome home their *vicomte*.

She'd never experienced a gathering like it. The cavernous hall boasted huge tapestries on its walls and more than one enormous hearth—each large enough to roast an ox—where hearty fires burned, chasing away the chill of March winds. She knew of no earldom in England with a castle that bespoke such wealth, nor a populace such loyalty. Yet, there was nothing ostentatious or arrogant about the hall's opulence. Indeed, frayed and smoke-blackened banners wafted from the rafters. No doubt embroidered by a long dead ancestor, they spoke of pride in the Montbryce heritage.

No casual visitor would guess the people celebrating with such unbridled joy faced an uncertain future under a foreign king not known for his benevolence. In keeping with the Lenten season, the food was simple but plentiful—the most flavorful trout recipe Marguerite had ever tasted—and the watered ale flowed freely. The priest had granted a special dispensation for casks of apple brandy to be made available for hundreds to enjoy a taste. Everyone was so obviously glad to be rid of their duke—her hated cousin.

The fear she might let something slip about her kinship to John only added to her exhaustion. It was likely the perceptive *comtesse* sensed she was being evasive.

Surreptitious glances and comments whispered behind hands were a clear indication the tale of her escape from Gaillard in the guise of a nun had spread like wildfire. People surely knew of the dagger too.

The Montbryce brothers soaked up the good wishes, acknowledging the many toasts to their health. Becket smiled broadly—until his gaze fell on her. She cursed John Lackland for turning her into a lying pariah. No wonder the Norman found her

disgusting. He was probably appalled he'd allowed his male attraction to show. She would have preferred to dine alone in her chamber, but the *comte* had insisted she join his family at the head table.

Seated beside her, the *comtesse* explained the brothers had two sisters, both married and with children of their own. She wondered again why the *vicomte* wasn't married, but it wasn't her place to ask such a question.

She was about to beg leave to retire, when the *comte* rose and a hush fell over the gathering.



* * *

Becket groaned inwardly when his father declared his certainty that everyone wanted to hear about the siege and how Gaillard's final capitulation had come about.

He'd enjoyed the rowdy celebration in the familiar surroundings he loved. It was good to be home. Gaillard was the last thing he wanted to talk about, especially with Marguerite present. She'd endured the horror from the other side. That notion resurrected his doubts about just which side Marguerite was on. At first, she'd treated him with disdain. He'd initially put her attitude down to an attempt at religious detachment, but now he suspected she considered him a traitor. *Dieu* knew allying with the French had made him and his brothers feel like traitors to his duke. Was she on King John's side?

Shaking his head, he waved away his father's request, but the avid crowd was having none of it.

Careful not to allow his glance to stray to Marguerite, he stood and reluctantly began the tale. "Our forces reached the outermost ward by undermining its main tower."

He surveyed the nodding heads. It sounded simple enough but

he doubted anyone present understood the magnitude of such a task, especially since King Richard had designed Gaillard to be impregnable. However, he preferred not to linger on the details.

“Following this, we were tasked with finding a weak point in the castle. We gained access to the next ward when a French soldier found a latrine chute through which our men could crawl.”

He smiled at the cries of disgust. “To my great relief, I wasn’t obliged to enter the latrine chute. Adrien, however...”

Laughter ensued as tankards were raised to his blushing brother.

“After ambushing several unsuspecting guards and setting fire to the buildings, we lowered the drawbridge which allowed the rest of our army into the castle.”

Cheers resounded.

“The defenders retreated to the innermost ward. After a short time, the French successfully breached the gate and what was left of the garrison retreated to the keep.”

He scanned the rapt faces but couldn’t bring himself to look at Marguerite. He wondered where she had hidden while all this mayhem was going on. She must have been terrified.

Jolted from his reverie by the sudden lull, he realized his people were waiting. He swallowed hard and continued the account. “With supplies running low, Roger de Lacy and his knights eventually surrendered to the French army, bringing the siege to an end.”

He decided to stop there. There wasn’t a man or woman present who wasn’t aware of what happened to most of the unfortunates inside a besieged castle when it fell.

“Here’s to our gallant *vicomte*,” a man shouted into the silence.

Becket raised his hand. “I may have been in command, but credit for the victory goes to my brothers, the Montbryce knights and other Normans who fought so bravely after enduring a bitter cold winter.”

“To the men of Montbryce,” echoed around the hall.

“But...”

Curious faces turned to listen as a hush fell once more.

“We cannot forget that most of the men, women and children who resisted so courageously, and for so long, were fellow Normans. I’m not ashamed to say my heart bleeds for them. However, we all accept the reason Normandie had to be wrested from the tyrant’s rapacious grip. Blame for the incredible suffering of those trapped in Gaillard lies squarely at the feet of King John.”



* * *

Marguerite shivered uncontrollably, despite the heat in the hall. She hadn't known the details of the castle's final death throes but had no trouble remembering the abject, paralyzing fear.

Nor had she ever given any consideration as to why the Normans had sided with the French. To the bitter end, she'd espoused loyalty to King John and despised the Norman traitors. She'd blamed men like Becket de Montbryce for her agony.

Yet, it was her cousin who'd betrayed her time and again. He had trapped her in Gaillard, though he was probably thoughtlessly unaware of her plight. It was a bitter irony that her kinship with the hated king would turn the jubilant crowd against her when they discovered it.

Finally given leave to escape the hall, she retreated to her chamber and retrieved the sheathed dagger from beneath the mattress. Clutching it to her breast, she collapsed atop the linens and sobbed herself to sleep, still fully clothed.

Our Guest From Cumbria

Shortly after dawn, Becket answered his father's summons and tapped on the door of his parents' solar. He supposed he must have finally fallen asleep after retiring late the previous night. Was it one hour or two he'd lain awake, despite his exhaustion?

He simply couldn't get Marguerite out of his thoughts. He regretted the pain evident on her stricken face during the recounting of Gaillard's final days. He'd forced her to relive the torment, though he hadn't been given any choice.

It would take him years to forget Gaillard. How could a woman trapped inside the fortification ever be free of the horror? He had his own tortured memories of the siege, but hadn't endured the agony of near-starvation nor been eaten away by the constant uncertainty of what would happen if the castle fell.

The more he thought about it, the more he admired Marguerite's courage. She hadn't been willing to simply accept her probable fate at the hands of French soldiers. Or had the motivation for her flight stemmed from more than the very real possibility of rape?

His mind in a turmoil, he entered the solar, knowing he was expected. His mother greeted him with a warm embrace. Roland and Adrien arrived soon after.

His frowning father got straight to the point. "Philip has joined his troops and begun his march into Normandie."

Becket raked a hand through his hair. "It was to be expected. The path is clear now Gaillard doesn't stand in his way."

His father nodded his agreement. "Reports are he's following the Seine and has also sent troops south into Anjou."

Becket had already worked out the most likely strategy. "He'll enter Rouen first; the rest of the duchy will fall into line once he controls our capital. The loss of Anjou will infuriate John. It's where the Plantagenet dynasty began."

"This perhaps gives us a month or two before the French come to our door," his mother suggested.

For as long as he could recall, Becket's parents had ruled Montbryce together. He was aware some Normans were

contemptuous of his father for considering a woman's opinions. Barr de Montbryce respected his wife's intelligence too much to pay heed to the naysayers. Becket had hoped to wed a woman willing to share the responsibilities when the time came for him to inherit the earldom. It seemed increasingly unlikely he would ever find such a partner. Paulina had severely eroded his trust in the fairer sex.

"We have time to make further preparations," Roland said.

Their father elaborated. "We've already strengthened the outer rampart. Our garrison is stronger now you boys and your men have returned. We will welcome Philip when he eventually comes, as I'm sure he will. However, I want him to think twice about what it might cost him if he contemplates confiscating our home."

"Similar preparations are underway at our other holdings—Alensonne, Giroux, Belisle and Domfort," Becket's mother informed them. "The French king will have more than this stronghold to deal with if he decides to be greedy."

Becket inhaled deeply, reluctant to bring up the topic of Marguerite. "The other thing to consider is what to do with our guest from Cumbria."

"Philip needn't be told she escaped from Gaillard," Adrien replied.

"But that isn't what concerns you, is it?" their mother asked Becket.

She knew him well but he wasn't sure in his own mind why he was convinced Marguerite hid a secret. "Perhaps we can pass her off as your kinswoman," he suggested.



* * *

Seated in the *comte's* solar, Marguerite didn't know what to make of the suggestion she pose as Lady Hollis' kinswoman, if and when King Philip arrived. Clearly, she'd been the topic of discussion prior

to her arrival.

The *vicomte* stood by the hearth, his expression unreadable.

"You mention it might be months before the French king comes," she began, trusting her hosts wouldn't be angered by her response. "I had hoped to be on my way home to England before that."

Comte Barr shook his head. "We cannot risk sending anyone to England for quite a while yet."

"I could travel on my own," she suggested, though the prospect of undertaking such a perilous journey filled her with dread.

"Absolutely not," *Vicomte* Becket declared. "I didn't aid in your escape from Gaillard to expose you to such risks."

It was on the tip of her tongue to remind him she'd extricated herself from Gaillard with Thomasse's help. She should have remained silent, but... "Had it been your choice, you would have brought Sister Thomasse with you, not me."

He clenched his jaw and narrowed his eyes, clearly angered. "Because Sister Thomasse isn't a woman with secrets," he hissed.

An icy hand gripped her innards. Becket was an honest, forthright and trustworthy man. She longed to confide in him but her kinship with John might be more than the Montbryces could stomach. And, would they be willing to conceal it from King Philip?

"I would be honored to be counted among your kin, Lady Hollis," she said softly, wishing with all her heart the *Comtesse* de Montbryce was, in fact, her relative.



* * *

Becket swore under his breath. He had to keep reminding himself Marguerite had endured unfathomable hardship and, once more, he'd caused her further pain. Perhaps her secret concerned something that had happened to her during the siege. He'd assumed

the fear of being raped had promoted her flight, but she may have been violated before the castle's defenders capitulated.

He ground his teeth, outraged by the very real possibility. The rule of law must have broken down as the siege dragged on and it was every man for himself. Women would have become vulnerable. Small wonder she'd armed herself with a dagger—a weapon he didn't doubt she still had in her possession.

Holy Friday

Friday, March 26th, 1204, Holy Friday

In preparation for the day's somber religious observances, Marguerite dressed in a dull brown gown, the most discrete of the ones she'd been given.

She'd spent most of the intervening sennight fretting about her situation, teetering between confessing all to the Montbryces and keeping silent.

Lady Hollis had been kindness itself during the hours spent sewing with the *comtesse* and her ladies. Her hostess delighted in speaking her native tongue, and Marguerite had to admit she enjoyed the tales of a little girl growing up in Cumbria. It wasn't so very different from her own childhood and she slowly felt comfortable enough to reveal some of her personal memories.

Becket's mother even shared the reason for her eldest son's name, hesitantly recounting the dark details of her brother's part in the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket.

As for the *vicomte*, Marguerite caught a glimpse of him at Mass every morning and at the evening meal, but neither occasion offered an opportunity for conversation. In any event, his icy demeanor led her to believe he didn't wish to speak to her.

Adrien treated her politely. Roland never missed an opportunity to smile as his gaze raked over her. It was ironic she was drawn to the sullen, silent brother who couldn't stand her, not to the charming son who at least had the courtesy to greet her with a smile.

Lady Hollis explained her husband and sons were busy preparing everyone who resided within Montbryce's walls for the arrival of Philip of France.

Marguerite dreaded the French king's visit. She'd never met him, but he may have been aware King John's cousin was inside Gaillard, though how he could know such a thing was beyond her—and what might lead him to believe she was that cousin? Her worries were leading her into a quagmire of nonsensical what ifs.

How much more daunting must Philip's impending arrival be for Lady Hollis, yet, to the outward eye, she remained calm.

Marguerite visited the orphans each day. At first, they appeared happy to see her, except for Jacqueline who retreated behind her foster mother's skirts. However, she sensed the children were becoming less and less enthusiastic about her visits. She didn't blame them. Her presence evoked memories of their horrific ordeal; they and their foster parents were forging a new future, one that didn't include the woman who'd masqueraded as a nun. Everyone seemed relieved when her visits ended after a few minutes.

On this day of fasting, she ate bread and drank watered ale. After the deprivations of Gaillard, fasting wasn't a hardship. In fact, she didn't seem to need as much food to satisfy her hunger as she had in the past. Perhaps she'd always eaten too much.

The meal normally served at midday was over and done in time for everyone to be on their knees in the chapel by the noon hour. Marguerite dutifully trailed along behind the Montbryces, mortified when Lady Hollis contrived to place her beside the *vicomte* for the three-hour long observance of Christ's agony on the cross.



* * *

As he knelt in the chapel, Becket glared at his mother, but she simply smiled. Did she not understand Marguerite was the last person he wanted to kneel beside for three hours? Especially since silence was expected while everyone contemplated Christ's agony.

Once the contemplation was over, the lengthy, symbolic rite of Holy Friday would begin—the readings, the petitions and the Veneration of the Cross were all still to come.

For days, he'd done his utmost to avoid Marguerite, despite being constantly tempted to seek her out. His mother clearly enjoyed the time spent reminiscing but complained their guest

wasn't eating enough. Idiot that he was, he felt responsible for her and was glad to see the gaunt signs of hunger slowly disappear. She was filling out nicely as far as he was concerned.

It irked that Marguerite attracted him physically. Had he been so long without female companionship that he lusted after a woman he couldn't trust?

As time crept on, he tried his best to meditate on the suffering Jesus had endured for mankind's salvation, but all he could think of was Marguerite and what she had suffered. It wasn't surprising she mistrusted men if she had, in fact, been violated during the siege.

For generations, Montbryce men had been afflicted with rheumatism in the knees. Becket had heretofore considered himself lucky to have escaped the malady but, as the hours went by, he began to fear his aching knees would buckle when he stood. Fit as he was, his body was eventually unable to maintain its rigid posture. He became aware he was leaning against Marguerite, his shoulder touching hers. He should move away, but found he lacked the will.



* * *

Marguerite drew strength from the warmth of the *vicomte's* arm. The chill of the chapel and the ache in her knees and hips were bearable so long as he leaned against her.

Despite the many disappointing betrothals she'd endured, she'd never craved the attention of a man. She'd sorely misjudged the brave warrior kneeling beside her. The woman who earned his love and loyalty would be blessed. Much as she wanted his regard, he would never see her as anything other than a liar. And why should he trust her? She suspected he resented the close proximity that obliged their bodies to touch.

The urge to confide her secret was overwhelming, but even a

whisper would draw attention.

He would never know the real Marguerite d'Aigremont; she hardly knew herself anymore. The bitter realization tightened her throat and brought tears to her eyes.



* * *

The familiar rituals of the Holy Friday ceremony gradually calmed Becket. The sweet-smelling clouds of incense and the priest's chanting lulled him into a contemplative mood. He sang the required responses without thinking twice.

He began to ponder the future. The French worshipped the same God he and his fellow Normans did, so it was probable life under a French king wouldn't be so bad. However, John was an adherent of the same religious beliefs and he was a terrible ruler.

His meditative state lasted only until Father Guillaume invited the faithful to venerate the cross of Christ. Obligated to help Marguerite to her feet, the soothing scent of lavender stole up his nose, resurrecting fantasies of bathing with a beautiful woman. Standing behind her in the line to the altar rail, he fisted fingers that itched to tangle themselves in the red glory visible through the sheer veil she wore.

He later had no recollection of actually touching his lips to the crucified Christ, but he recalled praying fervently that he'd soon find a way to be rid of the temptation of Marguerite d'Aigremont. He feared the woman had bewitched him.

Resurrection

Sunday, March 28th 1204, Easter Sunday

When Becket arrived, the Great Hall was already full to bursting. It appeared the joyful message of dawn's Easter Sunday Mass had filled everyone with new hope. The noisy, jubilant crowd was celebrating the end of Lent, and Christ's resurrection. The castle's cooks had risen to the occasion. The servery was laden with platters of fried ham, heaping bowls of steaming hot porridge—a staple at Montbryce since his Scottish grandmother's time—coddled eggs, and fresh baked bread.

A cheer went up when Becket entered. He acknowledged the greeting with a wave, pleased to see the orphans from Gaillard among those tucking into the plentiful food.

He was looking forward to his first satisfying meal in several months. As he heaped food onto his trencher, he acknowledged he'd always taken Montbryce's bounty for granted. Easter was a time for renewal and he resolved to be more thankful for the good life he led.

He carried his food and a tankard of ale to the head table. Having spent time speaking with the priest after mass, he wasn't surprised to be the last member of his family to arrive. Even Marguerite was there, looking surprisingly attractive in an elegant russet gown that had lain hidden under the woolen cloak she'd worn in the drafty chapel. He deposited his meal at his place beside his father and was about to sit when his mother reminded him it was Easter.

"I've been remiss in forgetting our traditions," he replied.

Accordingly, he worked his way along the table, shaking hands with the men of his family. "May God bless you on this Easter Day," he repeated.

They each returned the greeting.

He then gave his mother the traditional kiss of peace on both cheeks and wished her the same.

"Thank you, my son. Don't forget Marguerite."

Conflicting emotions assailed him. Marguerite's pallor and downcast eyes suggested she didn't want him to kiss her. When she glanced up at him, the longing in her eyes was confusing. Jealousy—an unwelcome and stupidly unreasonable emotion—reared its head. Had Roland kissed her? Adrien?

He wasn't worried about his youngest brother, but Roland...

Realizing he must look ridiculous hesitating like a nervous lad, he bent his head and kissed Marguerite on each cheek. As he withdrew, it was impossible not to notice the swell of her breasts, particularly since she seemed to be gasping for breath. The familiar lavender stole up his nostrils. Wide eyes held his gaze. Heat flooded his body as his cock saluted, rendering him barely able to choke out the greeting. "May God bless you on this Easter Day, Marguerite."

"And you, Becket," she whispered in reply. It was the first time he'd heard his given name on her lips and she looked as shocked by the intimacy as he felt.



* * *

Marguerite had never been a religious person. That wasn't to say she hadn't been a faithful worshipper, even in the darkest days of the siege. However, the notion of resurrection was one she'd celebrated since childhood without truly understanding—until this Easter morning.

She felt like a plant dormant through the long winter that the spring rains and sunshine bring back to life. Inhaling the redolent aromas of fresh baked bread and fried ham stirred a desire to rejoin the world, to leave the cold dread of the siege behind, to live again. She had risen from the dead.

Becket's chaste kiss gave rise to newer, womanly desires. For years, she'd resented John's failure to sanction a marriage, not because she craved the men she was supposed to marry. She had

never met most of them.

Becket de Montbryce drew her like a lodestone. The featherlight touch of his lips on her cheeks caused an aching warmth to blossom in a very intimate place. The heat in his face and the light rasp of his morning stubble had a strange effect on her nipples. For the first time in her life, she longed for a man to touch her breasts, to put his mouth on the tingling tips. She wanted to be cherished, to be loved.

The lust in his blue eyes and the flared nostrils told her she'd roused his male interest. But his deep frown confirmed she would never capture his heart.



* * *

Becket stared at the empty trencher in front of him. He must have eaten the ham, the bread, the porridge—but had no memory of tasting anything.

To his right, Roland was flirting with a serving girl.

His father nudged him, apparently waiting for an answer to something he'd asked, but Becket had no idea what it was.

He mumbled a reply, hoping he'd said something intelligent. His thoughts were in turmoil, seemingly a frustratingly common occurrence when he was near Marguerite.

Everyone around him was celebrating the resurrection. Since Paulina's betrayal, he had buried himself in a tomb of mistrust and resentment. He welcomed the sudden desire to be the man he'd once been. It disturbed him that a woman he didn't trust had kindled a spark of hope in his wounded heart.



* * *

Surrounded by the smiling faces of well-fed people, Marguerite couldn't recall ever finding herself in a happier place than Montbryce. Despite the monumental changes they faced, the people must have confidence in their overlord's ability to protect them.

The air was redolent with the tempting aromas of nourishing food, but the scent that lingered in her nostrils was Becket's—male, musky, intoxicating.

Why did her thoughts and feelings become muddled whenever he was near? She hated and resented him—didn't she?

Thwarted

Guilt plagued Marguerite. She should have confessed her lies before the dawn of this Easter Day. Now, it was too late, and she still lacked the courage to reveal her identity. However, there were things she could do to make amends. Speaking to Becket was too daunting a prospect, but his mother would listen, and it would be easier to explain herself in their native tongue.

“Lady Hollis,” she murmured as they rose from the table. “May I speak with you privately?”

“Come to my solar,” the *comtesse* replied softly.

Marguerite followed, bowing her head when she was assured they were alone in the solar. “I beg leave to teach the orphans from Gaillard,” she began, declining an offer to be seated.

Lady Hollis frowned as she seated herself in one of the upholstered red armchairs. “And what do you propose to teach them?”

Marguerite fisted her hands in the folds of her skirts. “Letters, numbers, songs perhaps.”

The *comtesse* indicated the chair next to her. “I do wish you would sit so we can discuss this properly. Their foster parents might say they have no need of education.”

As she complied with the request to be seated, Marguerite took a chance. “I venture to say you wouldn’t agree with them.”

Becket’s mother smiled. “You’d be right. I believe everyone can benefit from learning. The children do have duties, though. When would you conduct these lessons?”

“Perhaps for a short time before they break their fast. The first meal of the day would be the reward for participating, and the timing shouldn’t interfere with their other tasks.”

The *comtesse* remained silent for a few minutes, then said, “The idea has merit. I’ll speak to Bonhomme about it. He’ll know best how to handle things.”

“Thank you,” Marguerite replied as she started to rise.

Lady Hollis put a hand on her arm. “Was there something else you wanted to discuss?”

Here was the point of no return. She could continue to conceal her identity to this woman who probably sensed she wasn't being completely truthful. Staying silent would prolong the torment and the worry. If Philip ever found out the Montbryces had harbored King John's cousin...

Perhaps the truth would set her free. "I have not been completely honest," she confessed, gripping the arms of the chair.

"You'll feel better if you tell me," the *comtesse* replied.

"It's about my family," she began, afraid to look at her hostess.

"Go on."

They both startled when Becket burst into the solar.



* * *

"*Maman*," Becket declared, surprised to find Marguerite in his parents' solar. "Forgive the interruption. A contingent of cavalry is approaching the rampart. Papa requests you join him at the entrance to the keep."

His mother rose. "Is it Philip?"

"They are French, but do not appear to be carrying the king's standard. It's too small a group to be an invading army."

"Envoys, perhaps."

"What should I do?" Marguerite asked.

The abject fear contorting her face gave him pause. "You have nothing to be afraid of," he assured her. "It's a good sign Philip has sent a small troop."

"We'll see," his mother replied. "I will join my husband. Becket, escort Marguerite."

He thought to protest, but his mother rushed out of the solar before he had a chance. Her determination to throw him and Marguerite together was becoming annoying. Did she not realize he didn't trust the woman?

He offered his hand, but Marguerite stared into nothingness, seemingly unable to rise.

"I'm afraid," she whispered.

No matter his opinion of her, a worthy knight had to offer his protection. "No harm will come to you," he promised. "Not while I live."

She inhaled deeply before rising to accompany him.



* * *

The French cavalry—about fifty men—rode into the inner bailey, hemmed in by a contingent of Montbryce knights led by Roland.

Marguerite, Becket and Adrien stood in the shadows of the entryway, behind the *comte* and *comtesse*. Clinging to Becket's arm, Marguerite felt him tense. She understood the reason when the man at the head of the French soldiers removed his helm.

"*Comte* Pierre de Vause," he spat.

An adder hissed in Marguerite's belly. She might have swooned had Becket not put his arm around her waist. "Courage," he whispered as she leaned on his strength. "He will not recognize you."

"How can you be sure?" she asked.

His smile brought tears to her eyes. "Because he briefly encountered an elderly nun. You're a beautiful young woman."

Despite the scowl on Vause's bearded face, Marguerite straightened her shoulders and took heart. Becket de Montbryce considered her beautiful.



* * *

Becket sensed Marguerite was surprised by the compliment he'd paid. It had cost him nothing. She truly was a beautiful woman but he suspected she didn't realize it. Perhaps she hadn't heard it said often enough.

However, he couldn't be distracted now by thoughts of Marguerite's beauty.

He wrestled with his hatred of de Vause. The Frenchman apparently had the king's ear. Patience and diplomacy would achieve more than confrontation with such a man.

Subterfuge

Becket hung back in the shadows. He'd have to speak to Vause sooner or later—but he intended it to be on his own terms.

The Frenchman executed a clipped bow and addressed Becket's father. "*Milord Comte de Montbryce*, I assume," he said. "Pierre de Vause, *Comte de Blois*. I bring greetings from your king, His Majesty, Philip Augustus of France."

"We are honored," Becket's father replied, "yet disappointed the king himself has not come to visit."

Becket couldn't resist a chuckle when Vause seemed at a loss as to how to reply to this veiled insult.

"After Rouen, His Majesty intends to visit all the noble families of Normandie," the Frenchman eventually replied. "However, he has sent me ahead to discuss a most serious matter with your son. It concerns a fugitive."

Sensing Marguerite's turmoil and fearing she might flee, Becket put a reassuring hand on her arm. "Don't panic."

"I can't imagine my son knowing anything about such things," his father replied, "but you and your men are welcome to enjoy the hospitality we Normans are famous for."

Vause raised an eyebrow. "I trust that includes a taste of the apple brandy I've heard so much about."

"Indeed."

His arm around Marguerite's waist, Becket drew her closer and stepped back as his parents escorted Vause into the keep.

Despite his efforts, the Frenchman paused and noticed him. "The *vicomte* will join us, of course," he said, his wide eyes fixed on Marguerite's breasts. "And his lovely wife."

"Of course," Becket replied, his dislike of the man compounded by the ogling insult he'd offered Marguerite. If she really was his wife, he'd have punched the leech's nose.



* * *

Marguerite couldn't breathe. Fear held her in its thrall, though Becket's solid strength offered warmth and reassurance. If he stepped away, she would dissolve in a puddle at his feet.

Vause had mistaken her for Becket's wife!

How it must pain the *vicomte* to have agreed to such a subterfuge. But the lie couldn't stand for long. Someone was sure to let slip that she was not, in fact, Becket's wife. He owed her nothing. She had to release him from this obligation.

"I..."

He put a finger to her lips and looked into her eyes. "Not now."

The temptation to lick the faint aroma of apple brandy from his fingertip was powerful. "You do not have to..."

"The die is cast," he rasped. "Vause will leave here believing we are man and wife. We must each play our part."

It wouldn't be difficult to pretend she cared for Becket de Montbryce. She was attracted to him physically, a circumstance she'd long thought she would never experience. However, the attraction went deeper than that. His humanity and his kind nature touched her soul.

She could happily spend her life pretending to be Becket's wife, but he was honorable to a fault. For him, the pretense would be a torment.



Becket kept one arm around Marguerite's waist and took hold of her hand as he escorted her to his parents' solar. She was trembling and he had a feeling she might swoon if he didn't keep her upright.

He wasn't sure which conflicting emotion to succumb to. The notion of being married to Marguerite bordered on the comical, but the situation wasn't a laughing matter. Vause's mention of a fugitive was confusing. Even if he'd discovered a woman had escaped Gaillard in the guise of a nun, why would he, or the French king for that matter, care? Unless there was something about his Englishwoman Becket didn't know.

That thought was also laughable. He'd known all along Marguerite hid a secret. He sensed he was about to find out what it was.

Perversely, Marguerite's body felt good pressed against him. He couldn't deny she attracted him physically. Along with a lovely face and incredible hair, she had a pleasing voice. She'd shown compassion for the orphans. Escaping Gaillard had taken courage and he couldn't forget the grim determination on her face when wolves threatened the children. All in all, the right man would be fortunate to have Marguerite as a wife.



Walking along the corridor, her eyes fixed on the back of Vause's head, Marguerite felt like a condemned prisoner heading to her doom. Servants made way for the *Comte* and his retinue, but Becket's grip on her waist raised more than one eyebrow. She didn't care. His support was the only thing preventing her from fleeing, although there was no safe refuge.

It pained her that this might be the last time she walked the

hallways of the castle she was coming to love. If only Montbryce could be her future home. If she and Becket were truly man and wife, he would protect her with his life, just as he protected everything he loved. The sad truth was, he didn't even like her.

He Knows

The oak bench in the solar wasn't comfortable, but it allowed Marguerite to sit beside Becket. The strength of his sword-calloused fingers meshed with hers bolstered her flagging courage as the *comte* and *comtesse* engaged in polite conversation with the king's emissary.

On this occasion, the small tumbler of apple brandy was also a welcome bracer. She inhaled the fumes as the liquid heat loosened the tightness in her throat.

Vause savored the liquor, extolling its taste and aroma and confirming it was every bit as good as he'd been told.

However, he declined the offer of a refill. "To business, I'm afraid," he declared, rousing the adder coiled in Marguerite's belly.

Vause cleared his throat. "In the aftermath of the siege, a little nun told me a female relative of King John was inside Gaillard."

Marguerite shuddered. After all they had suffered, survivors had likely been tortured into revealing the identities of noblemen and women trapped inside Gaillard.

Becket's grip on her fingers tightened.

He knows my secret.

"No doubt, you immediately dispatched this unfortunate woman to King Philip," Lady Hollis said, making no attempt to hide the sarcasm in her voice.

"Had I been able to find her, *oui*, but an exhaustive search failed to track her down."

"Dead, then," *Comte* Barr remarked.

Marguerite's heart raced. Becket's grip on her fingers was almost painful. The Montbryces must have deduced by now she was the missing relative, yet, they seemed intent on protecting her identity.

"I assumed so," Vause agreed, "but then the same nun eventually told me of an English noblewoman who fled the castle in the guise of a religious." He flashed a false smile. "The novice was heartbreakingly upset she'd been left behind."

Marguerite didn't blame the young nun. She could well imagine the girl desperately hoping the information would spare her from

Vause's depraved attentions.

Vause swiveled his gaze to Becket. "*Alors, mon ami*, can you tell me what happened to the nun who accompanied you from Gaillard?"



* * *

Becket had to be careful with his reply. Vause was sly and clever. However, his father took matters out of his hands. "I would have suggested you search for her in Caen. She intended to spend her last days in the community at the *Abbaye aux Dames*, so I doubt she is the woman you seek."

"Last days?" Vause asked, his nose twitching.

"Starvation had taken its toll," Becket's mother interjected. "Her body was unable to accept food and she was resigned to withering away. Indeed, I believe you considered her beyond help when you met her."

Becket had to applaud his mother's gumption at reminding the Frenchman he'd allowed the nun to escape.

"Would have suggested?" Vause said, apparently just becoming aware of the *comte's* words.

"Alas, the poor woman succumbed en route to Caen. Our knights buried her."

Vause narrowed his eyes. "Why did they not deliver her body to the nuns in Caen?"

"They considered it," Becket's father replied, sipping his apple brandy. "However, I had instructed them to return with all possible haste. You're aware these are uncertain times in Normandie. It behooves every castellan to have a full garrison within his ramparts."

"*Ruminate on that*," Becket thought, tempted to smile at the annoyance etched into Vause's face. The Frenchman had understood

the thinly veiled threat only too well.



* * *

When Vause turned his scowling gaze on her and Becket, Marguerite clung to the hope that he wouldn't recognize her as the nun he'd sent out of Gaillard. Certainly, she didn't feel like the same person.

Becket put a reassuring arm around her shoulders, hopefully giving the impression of being a protective husband. How she wished it were so.

Stroking his beard, Vause spoke to Becket. "And you believe the nun who travelled with you wasn't an imposter?"

Becket rested an ankle atop the opposite thigh. Marguerite wished she could summon up a similar impression of calmness. "My priority was to get my knights and foot soldiers home safely. The nun took care of the orphans. I barely spoke to her."

"Ah, *oui*. The children you brought to your castle without permission."

Marguerite admired Becket's control. She felt the tension in his arm, but his voice remained steady when he replied, "I surmised a French *comte* would not be interested in the welfare of Norman orphans."

Vause chuckled. "You were right! However, they are French now. I would like to meet with them and offer a welcome on behalf of my king."

Becket massaged Marguerite's nape with his thumb and forefinger, apparently sensing she was about to swoon from fright. The casual intimacy aroused feelings of desire, of being cherished. The white-hot fear simmering in her body turned into an inferno of longing.

She gasped when Lady Hollis rose, prompting everyone else to

do so.

“I suggest you meet them on the morrow,” the *comtesse* suggested. “They are no doubt tending to familial duties at the moment. Our steward will escort you to a chamber. You will, of course, be our guest at the evening meal in the Great Hall. You have only to ask for whatever you need.”

Vause inclined his head. “My thanks for your hospitality, *comtesse*. I fear I have been remiss in not introducing myself to the *vicomte*’s wife. Curiously enough, the woman who escaped apparently also had red hair.”

Marguerite clenched her jaw, hoping some sound would emerge from her parched throat. Becket’s father saved her. “A thousand pardons,” he replied. “Marguerite is my wife’s kinswoman and my eldest son’s betrothed.”

Not So Bad

Steward Bonhomme miraculously appeared, somehow sensing in his usual efficient manner, that his presence was required.

Vause bowed and left with him.

Marguerite sagged with relief but, for some unfathomable reason, Becket was loath to remove his arm from around her shoulders. Massaging the tension from her nape was a mistake. His intention had been to calm her but, instead, he'd succeeded in stirring the interest of his manhood.

If he wasn't mistaken, she hadn't been immune to his attentions. Disturbing as it was, he couldn't help but feel smug. His touch had melted the ice maiden.

Nor did she seem anxious to rise from the bench and put distance between them.

Perhaps his father's announcement had struck her dumb. He certainly didn't relish playing the role of Marguerite's intended husband, but it was preferable to the marriage being a *fait accompli*.

It was more likely she realized his family now knew her secret. There could be no doubt Thomasse had saved her from execution or imprisonment by spiriting her out of Gaillard. While Becket might abhor King John's tyranny, it was hardly Marguerite's fault she was related to the monster.

Before he could organize his thoughts, his mother approached and Marguerite rose. He stood quickly, missing the warmth of her body pressed against him.

"My lady," Marguerite began.

"You tried to tell me," Becket's mother replied, taking hold of Marguerite's hands.

"What do you mean?" Becket asked.

Marguerite looked into his eyes. "I was about to confide my identity when we were interrupted by the arrival of the French soldiers."

He saw sincerity in her gaze but still felt a twinge of annoyance. If anyone was entitled to an explanation, it was him. "Why did you not tell me?"

She averted her eyes. "I was afraid you'd turn me over to the French."

He gritted his teeth. "Surely you know me better than that."

"She does now," his father retorted as he joined them. "But consider the circumstances. How did she know she could trust you? Or any of us, for that matter?"

"All this is moot," Marguerite said softly. "Vause suspects who I am. I regret bringing him to your door. It would be best for all concerned if I leave."



* * *

Trapped inside Gaillard, Marguerite had known fear. She'd realized the danger to her life and liberty wasn't over simply because she'd escaped the fortress itself. Safety lay in Cumbria—at least, she hoped so. However, a noble warrior and his family were now caught in the web of lies she'd woven, and she was still far from home.

Worse still, she was drawn to Becket de Montbryce—an honorable man who must despise her kinship with King John. "I have to get back to England," she cried, trembling with the enormity of the difficulties ahead.

To her surprise, Becket took hold of her hands. "Look at me."

Afraid of the censure she would see in his eyes, she nevertheless obeyed, stunned by the compassion shining in the blue depths.

"England is out of the question, for the time being," he said softly.

The trembling ceased, thanks to the reassuring strength of his grip. She nodded her understanding, her throat still too constricted to produce intelligible sounds.

"In any case," he continued, "flight is impossible while Vause and his men are at Montbryce."

“I know,” she replied hoarsely.

“Our task now is to persuade the odious *comte* we are a betrothed couple deeply in love with one another.”

She closed her eyes to stem the welling tears. He was right, but the subterfuge would simply make him hate her all the more.



* * *

Becket drew Marguerite into his embrace, telling himself he did so simply because he hated to see a woman cry. She had endured a great deal over the last two years. He couldn't condemn her for trying to survive the horror by any possible means. Nor did he fault her for her kinship with King John.

He should be appalled by the prospect of playing the role of her betrothed, but had to admit her slender body felt good in his arms. He hadn't held a woman since...

Closing his eyes to shut out the memory, he rested his chin atop Marguerite's head and inhaled the familiar scent of lavender. “It won't be so bad,” he heard himself say.

Something unexpected happened as he rocked her gently. His body responded to the full breasts pressed against his chest. Marguerite's warm, lithe body didn't simply feel good in his arms. It felt right.



* * *

Marguerite's turmoil gradually drained away. Being held in Becket's arms was comforting. As she sagged against him, her breasts molded to his broad chest; her thighs pressed against his; her hips began to echo the slow rhythm of his rocking. A warm ache blossomed in a very intimate place. She closed her eyes and imagined she and Becket...

A polite cough jolted her out of her trance. She raised her head and looked into Becket's eyes. The blue had darkened and she saw the same startled surprise she felt.

Hard To See The Good

Becket and his father left to explain the necessity for subterfuge to Bonhomme. The steward would make sure the orphans and their foster parents didn't reveal that Marguerite was the nun who'd fled Gaillard. The *comte* intended to do all he could to dissuade the Frenchman from questioning them.

Left alone with the *comtesse*, Marguerite dithered. "I have brought danger to your door," she said softly, eyes downcast. "I am sorry I did not tell you sooner."

Lady Hollis shook her head. "Dear girl, my misguided brother was one of four men who assassinated an archbishop. We cannot undo bonds of kinship, no matter how much we may wish to. However, we are not accountable for the actions of other members of our family. Ultimately, the blame for the loss of Normandie's independence lies at the feet of King John, and his negligent brother before him. We would be facing uncertain times even if you were not here."

Marguerite shuddered. "But, if Vause ferrets out the truth..."

"Only think on this. Had my brother not committed a heinous murder, I would never have met my husband."

"You're saying I should look for the good that might come from all this. I admit it's hard to see."

"Well, a woman betrothed to a handsome warrior she loves to distraction would be full of joy. Vause will never believe you and Becket are looking forward to your marriage if you are always downcast and appear guilt-ridden."

Marguerite took a risk. "It won't be difficult to play the part of a woman in love with your son, my lady."

Lady Hollis arched her brows. "I thought not."



* * *

The orphans and their foster families were gathered in a corner of the Great Hall in response to Bonhomme's summons. Becket accompanied the steward to the meeting in the hope his presence would add weight to the importance of the message.

As soon as she saw him, Jacqueline begged to be hoisted on his shoulders. "In a moment," he said as he lifted her to perch on his hip. "I want to make sure all of you fully understand what I am about to tell you."

The adults nodded, but the children simply gaped. He hoped the gravity of the situation wasn't too much for them to grasp. "We have guests," he began.

"French," a few of the men spat.

Becket decided he didn't need to elaborate. The children got the idea the *guests* were not to be trusted. "Their commander is lodged in the castle and will sup in this hall. Some of you may remember him from Gaillard."

He worried it might be cruel to remind them, but at least they'd be forewarned. Jacqueline tensed in his arms. "We remember," she whispered. The other little ones nodded.

"He is angry he let Marguerite escape and wants to take her back to Gaillard. We have fooled him into thinking the nun who came with us went on to Caen and died on the way."

"But Sister Marguerite wasn't a nun," Jacqueline said.

"He doesn't know that. If he did, he'd make her go back to Gaillard."

Fear darkened many an eye.

"I will never allow any of you to be sent back there," Becket assured them, "and I have promised to protect Lady Marguerite as well."

He paused, not sure if he should involve them in the subterfuge though he really had no choice. "If necessary, she will become my

wife and thus have the protection of my name. Will you help me?"

Surprised smiles appeared on the faces of the adults; the children warmed his heart when they clustered around him, hugging his legs and promising to help. He hoisted Jacqueline on his shoulders, perturbed when she asked, "Does Lady Marguerite still have her dagger?"



* * *

Alone in her chamber, Marguerite retrieved her grandfather's dagger from beneath the mattress. She slid the weapon from its sheath and touched her finger to the point of the blade.

"Sharp," she murmured when a tiny glob of blood oozed.

A quick thrust into the heart would end her own torment and Becket's. If the Frenchman tried to arrest her, the dagger would fulfill its purpose. It was likely King Philip would throw her in prison; the prospect of a life sentence couldn't be borne. Death was preferable. However, the question remained. Would she have the courage to end it all when the time came?

Act One

An honorable man would escort his betrothed to the evening meal. Becket dutifully tapped on the door of Marguerite's chamber, relieved when Alys peeked out. He had no wish to enter, especially if Marguerite was alone.

"*Milord*," the grinning maid said, bobbing a curtsy. "Lady Marguerite is ready."

Becket wasn't prepared for the sight that greeted him when she opened the door wide.

He recognized the gown Marguerite wore as one belonging to his sister, but Annette had clearly never done the garment justice. The emerald green fabric clung to tempting globes rendered all the more enticing by a *décolletage* that left little to a man's imagination. The cut of the gown disguised bony hips. She looked the picture of rosy-cheeked health. He suspected Alys was responsible for the clever *maquillage* and the elaborate arrangement of the red glory interwoven with pearls.

Marguerite mistook his open-mouthed stare for censure. "It's too much, isn't it?"

Still gaping, he shook his head. "*Non*, you look wonderful." He came close to adding *like a comtesse*, but then wondered what he was thinking. This was a charade, but there was no need to overplay his part.

"And you look every inch the handsome *vicomte*," she replied with a shy smile.

He'd taken pains to dress in his finest red tunic, leggings and black boots and was stupidly pleased she'd noticed. "Shall we?" he asked, glad to see her smile.

He had to admit he liked the feel of her hand resting on his arm as they set off for the Great Hall. He thought they made an elegant couple. Vause would surely be convinced he was in the presence of a man in love and his bride to be.



* * *

Marguerite had to hope Becket wasn't simply being polite or playing his part when he said she looked wonderful. She needed his regard if she was to carry off the performance that lay ahead.

Conversation in the crowded hall ceased as soon as they entered. She faltered momentarily, but Becket reassured her. "Don't worry. These are my people. They won't betray us to the French. Bonhomme has seen to it."

When the hubbub resumed, she inhaled deeply and allowed him to lead her to the head table.

Lady Hollis sent her an encouraging smile, and the *comte* nodded his approval as she took her place of honor next to Becket. Unfortunately, this also meant Vause was seated to her right.

Becket's wink as he sat bolstered her courage and she smiled broadly at the Frenchman. "Good evening, my lord *comte*," she gushed, not surprised when he ogled her décolletage and licked his lips.

"Good evening, Lady Marguerite," he replied, finally dragging his gaze from her breasts.

Disgusting as it was, his uncouth nature boosted her confidence. She must be careful not to overplay her hand, but her mother had taught her how to deal with his ilk before. She was almost looking forward to leading him in a merry dance.



* * *

Becket relaxed as the meal progressed. He sensed the moment Marguerite's confidence blossomed. She fielded Vause's probing questions without hesitation, elaborating at length on her kinship with dear Lady Hollis and the understanding between the Montbryces and her parents that she and Becket would one day marry. "I've been in love with him for a long time," she told Vause, fluttering her eyelashes and blushing prettily. Becket might have believed the longing in her eyes himself.

Soon, she was chatting to Vause in perfect French, tittering at his every attempt at repartee. The siege had taken a toll on her but, clearly, she was an educated woman accomplished in the art of conversation. He almost felt sorry for Vause. She'd quickly got the measure of how to manipulate him.

The wretch seemed completely incapable of taking his lecherous eyes off her breasts. Becket glared at him—after all, that's what a betrothed man would do if a guest ogled his fiancée's breasts.



* * *

Marguerite was fairly certain Vause had no idea where Cumbria was, any more than she knew where Blois was located. She had no trouble making small talk about her moorland home, and he was more than anxious to tell her about Blois. He was one of those men who strutted like a peacock if a woman stroked his ego a little—and if she had a pleasing pair of tits for him to ogle.

For the first time, she began to hope she might put the horror of the siege behind her. Not only the siege, but the years of thwarted betrothals. Perhaps the resentful shrew could once more become the witty, optimistic woman she used to be. Could she live again?

Risking a glance at Becket she wondered if love had found her at

last.

The Kiss

Becket had dreaded the evening meal but, when all the trenchers had been cleared away, he found himself reluctant to leave the hall. Marguerite had put on a masterful performance. Well into his cups, Vause talked on and on, probably in the belief Marguerite was still enthralled by his conversation. Only Becket saw the wink and the conspiratorial smile when she turned to him.

Their partnership had worked well. He'd enjoyed himself and certainly glimpsed a side of Marguerite he hadn't seen before. A terrifying experience such as the siege would embitter any woman, but he got the feeling something more had happened to change her from the confidant, outgoing person he'd seen tonight. He didn't envy her kinship with a cruel tyrant like King John.

Hoping to spare her any more of Vause's self-aggrandizing diatribe, he stood and offered his hand. "Shall we, my sweet?" he asked. "It's getting late."

"Indeed," Vause replied, grasping Marguerite's elbow and assisting her to rise. "I too must seek my lonely bed."

Becket ground his teeth. Men of honor didn't utter such suggestive words to a woman of noble birth. However, all the guest chambers were located along the same corridor; he had no choice but to escort Marguerite with Vause hiccuping along beside them.

He paused outside her door, hoping the Frenchman would continue on to his chamber. Instead, he leaned against the wall, wiggled his eyebrows, and said, "Aren't you going to give your betrothed a good night kiss?"



Marguerite's confidence fled when she looked into Becket's eyes and saw panic. He clearly found the notion of kissing her abhorrent, but they had no choice.

As his arm tightened around her waist, she gave all her attention to his full lips, relieved to see a trace of a smile tug at the corners of his mouth.

Conflicting emotions tore at her heart. The desirable man who was about to bestow her first kiss didn't even like her. She had no experience of kissing. How was a woman supposed to respond?

As his warm lips brushed hers, his scent invaded her nostrils—musky, male, enticing.

It was tempting to giggle when he nibbled her lower lip. Emboldened, she nibbled back.

All coherent thought fled when he groaned, pulled her against his hard body and licked the seam of her lips. She opened instinctively, swept away on a flood of wanton feelings when he delved his tongue into her mouth.

She clung to him as her feet left the floor. All the colors of the rainbow exploded behind her closed eyes. She whimpered, filled with a lunatic urge to wrap her legs around his hips.

Her fingers took on a life of their own, tangling in the silk of Becket's long, dark tresses.

Fill me, fill me, an inner voice urged as she suckled his tongue, tasting apple brandy and desire.

The sound of slow clapping jolted her back to reality.

"Bravo!" Vause crowed. "Quite a performance."

She swayed when Becket set her back on her feet, his frown betraying his puzzlement. She'd wager he'd been as shocked by the kiss as she.

"Goodnight, *milord comte*," he growled at Vause.

The grinning Frenchman took the hint and staggered off in the direction of his own chamber.



Irritating as Vause was, Becket wasn't sure what might have happened had the Frenchman not been watching.

He'd intended to give Marguerite a chaste kiss, maybe nibble her lip for good measure.

He hadn't been prepared for his body's reaction to her taste, her perfume, the warmth of her lips. Paulina's betrayal had killed any desire to share his body with a woman. Yet, his enthusiastic cock urged him to carry Marguerite into her chamber and continue exploring the passion she had ignited.

The innocence of her response inflamed him, as did her willingness to allow his tongue entry.

Vause's cynical interruption was perhaps for the best, but did the man suspect it was all a performance? The kiss had started out that way, but the insistent ache in Becket's loins was no act.

"I apologize," he told Marguerite as he took a step back and opened her door. "I got carried away."

"As did I," she confessed, blushing fiercely. "Good night."

A Dog With A Bone

Marguerite slept fitfully after the unsettling events of the previous evening. She worried her heart couldn't keep up the charade.

It was one thing to pretend to care about a man she wasn't falling in love with; she'd done it before with the few fiancés she'd actually met.

Another episode like last night's kiss and Becket would surely realize she was infatuated with him. She resolved to squelch any burgeoning feelings, but desire spiraled into her womb as soon as she set eyes on Becket when he arrived to escort her to the hall.

She averted her eyes from his piercing blue gaze. "Good morrow, my lord," she murmured.

He offered his arm. "Good morrow. After last night, I think you should call me Becket."

"I suppose until Vause leaves," she replied, not certain of his meaning. "Becket."

He patted her hand. "The good news is the Frenchman intends to depart for Rouen directly after he and his men have broken their fast."

It was a relief, yet it meant an end to exhilarating kisses. "One more meal to get through," she replied, hoping she sounded relieved.

"You handled him well last night," he said. "You're a good conversationalist."

The praise tightened her throat. He was just being polite, but she would treasure every morsel he threw her way. "I used to be," she conceded.

"You'll find yourself again, once you're able to put the siege behind you."

She could have wept. If only it were that simple to erase a lifetime of hurtful disappointments that had nothing to do with the siege.



* * *

As he escorted Marguerite to her seat, Becket again sensed there was more to her unhappiness than the siege. However, Vause's presence rendered it impossible to conduct a meaningful conversation.

He'd tossed and turned most of the night, reliving the kiss, trying to convince himself he'd simply responded like any red-blooded male, but he knew it was a lie.

There was an alchemy between him and Marguerite he couldn't deny. Even as they sat breaking their fast under Vause's persistent gaze, he wanted to kiss her again.

It was lunacy. There was no future for them. She hated him for his part in Gaillard's downfall. As far as she was concerned, he had betrayed his duke—a tyrant who happened to be her kinsman. She'd made it clear she wanted to return to England as soon as possible.

He stood when Vause finally rose to excuse himself, but the Frenchman shook his head. "Please, stay with your lovely fiancée. I shall see you soon enough. When I inform His Majesty of your upcoming nuptials, I am confident he will be anxious to ride to Montbryce so he may be present at such a momentous occasion. It isn't every day an important Norman *vicomte* gets wed."

Jealousy surged when the fiend bestowed a lingering farewell kiss on Marguerite's hand. Her pallor disturbed him more.

Becket's father accompanied Vause as he left. His mother's wide-eyed puzzlement echoed the conflicting emotions in his heart. He had told the orphans he would wed Marguerite if it became necessary. He had never imagined it would come to that and had no wish to marry a woman who despised him.



* * *

When Becket's father returned to the hall, he suggested the family meet privately in his solar. Almost dizzy with panic, Marguerite was grateful. Clearly, a plan had to be formulated quickly to get her out of the castle and on her way home. She couldn't bear the thought of Becket being forced to marry her.

He escorted her to the bench they had shared before, but she declined and sat in an upholstered chair. His nearness made it impossible to keep her wits about her. He raised an eyebrow but made no remark.

Anxious to begin her argument, she deferred to the *comte* as protocol demanded. Scanning the faces of the assembled clan—Becket, his brothers and parents—she felt a keen sense of loss. To belong to such a close-knit family...

"Any suggestions?" *Comte* Barr asked.

"I must leave here," Marguerite replied, avoiding Becket's gaze. "Surely you can all see that?"

"Maybe Vause was just trying to impress us with his own importance," Adrien offered.

"Possibly," his father conceded. "But can we take that chance?"

"No," Marguerite insisted. "If he still suspects my kinship with John, he'll be like a dog with a bone."

"And he will likely pass on his suspicions to King Philip," Lady Hollis agreed.

"Everyone is at risk if the French king comes here and discovers the truth," Marguerite pointed out.

Roland cleared his throat. "There's one way to make sure the French think you are indeed betrothed to my brother. He's the heir to Montbryce and has to marry sooner or later."

Marguerite risked a glance at Becket who, so far, had remained strangely silent. His clenched jaw told her all she needed to know. "Absolutely not," she declared before he had a chance to sacrifice

himself.

A Tentative Plan

Becket was about to suggest he and Marguerite talk over the situation in private; perhaps if they got to know each other, shared a few more kisses...

Her adamant refusal of Roland's suggestion left no doubt she found the idea of marrying him abhorrent. So be it.

"We can sail from Ouistreham in the galley we keep at the ready there," he said as he stood.

"But the usual English ports might not be safe for you," his father replied.

"So we put ashore at Melton Manor in Sussex."

"I don't know where that is," Marguerite confessed.

"It's a Montbryce holding on the cliffs overlooking the Narrow Sea," his father explained. "More than a hundred years ago, Hugh de Montbryce rescued Devona Melton from an unscrupulous Norman bully who'd stolen the manor from the Melton family in the aftermath of the Conquest."

"It's a convoluted tale," his mother added. "Part of the family lore. The abusive wretch had forced Devona into a sham marriage, but the Conqueror eventually annulled it. Hugh married her."

"Their eldest son, Melton de Montbryce, inherited Domfort Castle in Normandie. Their daughter, Antoinette, inherited Melton Manor. She married a de Quincey and the manor has been in that family ever since. Terric de Quincey is the current Lord of Melton."

"So," Marguerite asked, "will Terric de Quincey welcome us?"

"Of course," Roland interjected. "They're kin."



Marguerite swallowed the bitter retort on the tip of her tongue. Kinship had been nothing but a burden to her. The possibility of reaching England was tantalizing, but obstacles remained. "Melton Manor is on the south coast. Cumbria is almost as far north as Scotland."

"We'll have to assess the lay of the land once we arrive," Becket replied. "Terric will know the best route to take."

Becket would be risking his life by sailing to England, so she hesitated to badger him for more details. "Perhaps your kinsman can provide an escort for me, and you can return to Normandie safely."

"No," he retorted. "I will personally see you get to where you want to go."

The anger burning in his blue eyes confused her. Was he angry because she wanted to leave or did he resent the danger to himself? He was, after all, the heir to Montbryce.

She wished they might have an opportunity to meet privately. Perhaps if they got to know each other...

It was a foolish notion. She cringed when he abruptly took his leave, muttering about sending pigeons to Melton Manor.



* * *

Becket stared at the slip of parchment in his hand. Pigeons cooed in the cages amid which he stood, some strutting as if they sensed the freedom to fly was at hand. "How am I supposed to explain everything on this tiny piece of paper?" he mused aloud.

"It's a quandary," Roland replied, startling Becket from his reverie.

"I didn't realize you were behind me," he admitted.

Roland shrugged. "Just say you're coming with a woman you love who will be staying in England."

Becket grimaced. "I don't love her."

"But you care for her. More than you cared for Paulina."

It was a startling truth. He'd been preoccupied with Paulina's betrayal throughout the siege. Since meeting Marguerite, he'd barely given his former betrothed a thought. Kissing Paulina had never ignited a fire in his loins like the burning desire that had swamped him with Marguerite. "I'm simply concerned for her welfare."

Roland wiggled his eyebrows. "Of course. You might also mention you'll be anchoring offshore. In which case, you'll need a competent captain to stay aboard while you climb the steps from the beach to the house. I volunteer."



* * *

Marguerite spent the rest of the day with the *comtesse* and her ladies. She'd never been fond of embroidery, but had to admit it was a way to keep her mind off the future. The men of the family sequestered themselves in the Map Room. She supposed they were planning the journey.

Lady Hollis ordered food trays sent to her solar at midday and again in the evening, leaving no opportunity for Marguerite to meet with Becket.

His mother kept up a steady stream of conversation, giving no sign she was worried about her eldest son crossing the Narrow Sea to King John's England.

"I wish I had your serenity," Marguerite finally confessed as they ate the evening meal brought from the kitchens.

"It's an illusion," Lady Hollis admitted. "My heart breaks that things have turned out so badly. Becket deserves happiness."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"He has been reluctant to open his heart. Seeing the two of you

together, I'd hoped..."

"You're mistaken, my lady. Your son does not care for me."

"You're perhaps not aware he was betrothed before. For two years, he expected to wed Paulina de Varennes. Little did any of us know she would turn out to be a faithless woman who ran off and married another, although I must say I always felt uneasy about her."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I never saw Becket look at Paulina the way he looks at you. He treated her with respect, of course, perhaps even loved her in a chivalrous sort of way, but I suspect he was never in love with her."

"He cannot be in love with me. He despises everything about me. He can't wait to get me to England and be rid of me."

"It's because he cares about you he is willing to risk the journey. He believes it's what you want."

"It is. There's no future for me in Normandie."



* * *

Hand raised to tap at the door of his mother's solar, Becket paused when he heard Marguerite's voice. Her assertion she had no desire to remain at Montbryce spurred him on. He knocked and entered. "We leave on the morrow, at dawn," he announced, careful not to look at Marguerite. If he did, he might be tempted to suggest she stay a few more days.

"So soon?" his mother asked, aggravating his turmoil.

"I'll be ready," Marguerite replied, her eyes fixed on the embroidery in her lap.

Confidence

Marguerite had already risen when Alys came to wake her the next morning. She hadn't slept. Reasoning told her the journey to England was the only option. Her heart recognized she felt a sense of belonging at Montbryce. She couldn't deny she had feelings for Becket, but doubted his mother's opinion that he cared for her.

She was too exhausted and too heartsick to eat the bread rolls Alys brought. After helping Marguerite to dress, the maid wrapped the food in a napkin and tucked it into the satchel Lady Hollis had thoughtfully provided. "I wish you weren't leaving, my lady," Alys said softly as she adjusted the satchel's strap around Marguerite's shoulder.

"It's for the best," she replied, aware the maid likely knew nothing of her kinship with King John. "Goodbye, and thank you."

She was surprised to see the *comte* waiting in the corridor. "My lord," she murmured, hoping he hadn't discerned her disappointment Becket had not come to escort her.

"Lady Marguerite," he replied, offering his arm. "I wanted to wish you Godspeed."

"My thanks, for everything," she replied, blinking back welling tears as they walked.

"You'll always be welcome here," he said.

"Indeed," his wife confirmed as she joined them in the bailey.

Held fast in the *comtesse's* embrace, Marguerite squinted into the first weak light of dawn, hoping to catch a glimpse of Becket among the men and horses preparing to leave. Perhaps he wasn't coming after all.

"Goodbye," Lady Hollis said. "Safe journey."

"Thank you," she replied. "I will never forget your kindness."

She swallowed the panic in her throat when Becket appeared at her side and took her hand. His warm strength penetrated the wool of her mittens. If only things were different...



* * *

Becket wished Marguerite would meet his gaze. His heart was in turmoil. By the end of the siege, he'd more or less rid himself of the bitterness of Paulina's betrayal but come to the conclusion he would never entrust his heart to a woman again. He had two brothers who would eventually sire sons.

Now, he seemed unable to think of anything but Marguerite's belly round with his child. Male urges he thought were long dead had kept him tossing and turning all night. He craved a woman he'd felt nothing for a few sennights ago. Of course, he'd believed she was an elderly nun.

However, she seemed determined to leave. Perhaps it was for the best.

"We'll ride to the Orne," he explained as he lifted her into the saddle, "then board a boat to Ouistreham."

She took hold of the reins. "You said your family keeps a galley there."

He'd worried she might not be used to riding but she was clearly in control of the horse. Nevertheless, he was reluctant to remove his hands from her waist. "For generations. Always manned and ready to sail."

"I haven't crossed the Narrow Sea since..."

"Since you came to Gaillard," he said when she stopped abruptly. There was no opportunity to continue the conversation. They had to get underway. He nursed a faint hope she might later reveal all her secrets.



* * *

Marguerite wasn't surprised when Becket led the column away from Montbryce. He was a born leader who would always place himself in the most vulnerable position. Though a handful of knights separated her from him, she could still see his broad shoulders. Roland's presence riding beside her was a surprise and, in some ways, a blessing. It would be easier to talk to Becket's jovial brother than to him. "Surely you're not coming all the way to England?" she asked.

"I am," he replied with a smile. "Just to keep Becket out of trouble."

She sensed no ill-feeling emanating from him and being back on a horse was strangely comforting. It felt good to be doing something at which she excelled.

Riding by the extensive Montbryce apple orchards conjured a memory of the first time she'd imbibed the famous brandy. Blossom was starting to appear. "Do you expect a good harvest this year?" she asked Roland.

"We do," he replied. "Funny thing, but the fire actually improved the yields once the trees recovered."

"There was a fire?"

"When my grandfather, Alexandre, was *comte*. Geoffrey of Anjou's men set fire to the orchards."

"Queen Mathilda's husband?" she asked, reminded of a fragment of her own country's history.

"And father of Henry II, the king who inadvertently brought about the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket."

She gasped. "So much history, and all connected."

"To you as well, since you are related to King John, son of Henry II."

"Though I wish I wasn't," she admitted with a wry smile.

"You are John's cousin?" he asked.

“It’s complicated,” she replied. “My mother was cousin to Emma of Anjou.”

He frowned.

“Henry II’s half-sister,” she explained. “She married a Welsh prince, Daffyd ab Owain Gwynedd.”

“Half-sister?”

“She was Geoffrey of Anjou’s illegitimate daughter. Actually, she is still alive and considers herself very much John’s aunt.”

“But you’re so distantly related to John,” he exclaimed. “Not even through legitimate bloodlines.”

“That hasn’t stopped him exerting control over my life.”

“Sounds like him,” he replied.

When the river came in sight, Marguerite decided to confide everything to Roland. If she swore him to secrecy, he would be honor bound not to tell Becket. “I have been betrothed more times than I can remember,” she said softly. “John has refused to approve every suitor. He finally arranged a betrothal with a man I was to meet in Gaillard. I had no choice but to go.”

“Does Becket know all this?”

“No, and you must swear not to tell him.”

He shook his head. “I cannot make such a pledge, my lady. You should have sworn me to secrecy before you confided in me.”

Crossing

Becket clenched his jaw as he dismounted on the banks of the Orne. He hadn't been in favor of Roland's participation. As the second son, his brother should have remained at home, ready to take over the role of *vicomte* should anything untoward happen. What's more, it sounded like his brother was enjoying his conversation with Marguerite far too much. Why was it she could converse easily with Roland but not with him?

He shook his head, amazed at his own folly. Roland had always charmed women whereas he had consistently treated Marguerite coldly—except for that one kiss, which she probably believed was a typically male act fueled by lust. And perhaps she was right.

Still, an idiotic surge of jealousy gripped him when Roland helped Marguerite to board the waiting longboat and made sure she was comfortably settled.

Acting like a sullen child, he usurped Roland's usual place at the tiller and assigned his brother to an oar.

As the boat made its way downstream, it was as well he knew the Orne like the back of his hand. All his attention was on Marguerite who sat with her back to him, a woman alone amidst a dozen men. He should have allowed Roland to sit beside her, or kept her company himself. She faced uncertainty ahead. King John wasn't known for his predictability.

Normally a decisive, analytical man, Becket couldn't seem to form coherent thoughts when it came to Marguerite. Emotion kept tightening his throat.

As he'd hoped, the tide was favorable when they reached Ouistreham. The crew had the galley in the water, oars at the ready.

He chatted briefly with the captain who'd plied the Narrow Sea for years, explaining the plan to sail to Melton Manor. He trusted the man's loyalty and skill implicitly, so there was no reason to supervise him as the galley cast off. He strode to the sheltered bench in the stern, glared at Roland until he left, then took his place next to Marguerite.



* * *

Marguerite shivered when Becket sat beside her. A part of her wanted to chide him for leaving her alone since their departure. The uncertain side of her wanted to send him away.

Apparently sensing her nervousness, he put his arm around her shoulders. “Even on a warm day, it’s chilly out on the water. Lean into me. I’ll keep you warm.”

She ought to protest—his mother had generously gifted her a fine woolen cloak. However, she needed the warm strength of his body for more than simply warding off the chill, so she leaned her head against his chest. “Thank you,” she whispered.

When the wind caught the sail, he took her into his embrace and pulled her into his lap. The aroma of leather and man soothed her troubled spirit. Safe in the cradle of his arms and lulled by the steady beating of his heart, she succumbed to exhaustion and slept.

It was fully dark when male voices woke her. Some familiar—Becket, Roland. Shouts of greeting echoed off the water—voices she didn’t recognize, but they were speaking English.

“Terric,” Becket explained when he noticed she was awake. “My cousin is sending out a rowboat.”



* * *

Becket was glad Marguerite had slept. He’d dozed off a time or two

himself. But he'd also had a chance to think and come to the realization he didn't want to lose Marguerite. Watching her for hours as she slept, he could scarcely believe the beautiful woman in his arms was the same starved and traumatized wraith he'd disdained upon first meeting her.

He wished he knew more about this enigmatic woman so he could understand. Why had she never married? If they spent a few days together at Melton, perhaps he might learn something of her secrets. Her kinship with John wasn't the whole of it. That was neither here nor there to him. After all, an uncle he'd never met had murdered an archbishop.

Yet, he couldn't rid himself of the feeling John was involved in whatever had befallen her. Which made it all the more difficult to comprehend why she wanted so desperately to return to a land where the tyrant still held sway.

When Terric's rowboat came alongside, he knelt to pass Marguerite into his cousin's waiting arms, climbed aboard and left Roland in charge of the galley bobbing in the waters of the Narrow Sea. He looked up at the torchlit steps leading from the beach to Melton Manor and hoped he wouldn't live to regret bringing Marguerite back to her native land.

Arrival

Disoriented by the darkness and still half asleep, Marguerite clung to Becket when the rowboat reached shore and her feet sank in wet sand. She'd never heard him speak English before and it was comforting to detect a trace of his mother's Cumbrian lilt. A sudden, inexplicable yearning for Montbryce Castle welled up in her throat.

When he quickly introduced her to Terric de Quincey, she licked chapped lips, tasting salt, but sound refused to emerge. She couldn't say if Becket's kinsman was elderly or young. Slogging through the sand towards torchlit steps, she felt like a marionette controlled by an unseen drunken hand. Dizzied by the height of the staircase when she looked up, she doubted her trembling legs would carry her to the top of the cliff.

Tears of gratitude welled when Becket scooped her up and carried her as if she weighed nothing.

She whimpered, clinging to his neck when they encountered a host of huge dogs at the top.

"Don't worry," a female voice reassured her in English. "Our mastiffs won't hurt you."

She buried her face against Becket's neck, at a loss to explain the reason she felt more afraid than ever here in her native land.



* * *

Becket shouldn't have been surprised that Marguerite wasn't a heavy burden. She'd been starved for two years. He'd forgotten how frail she'd been when they'd first met. In the aftermath of Gaillard, he'd treated the orphans with more care and regard than this

English noblewoman.

Though he was carrying her to a destiny in which he'd have no part, she felt right in his arms, her breath warm on his neck.

He'd assumed she would relax once they reached England but he sensed apprehension as they crossed the beach. She tightened her manic grip when they reached the top of the cliff and entered Melton Manor. Perhaps the big dogs' enthusiastic welcome was too overwhelming. He knew Terric's mastiffs were friendly, but she didn't.

"We have a chamber ready for you both," Terric's sister said. "If you'd like to take her upstairs. Poor thing must be exhausted."

Becket had always liked Adelina de Quincey, though she'd grown considerably since he'd last seen her. The shy little girl had blossomed into an attractive young woman. However, her words gave him pause. "I don't want to put you to further trouble, *cousine*," he said, "but we'll need separate chambers."

He might have expected Adelina's fierce blush. "Oh," she replied. "Roland's message led us to believe..."

Becket clenched his jaw, fully intending to punch his brother's nose when next he saw him.

"I don't want to be alone," Marguerite whispered close to his ear before he had a chance to naysay whatever Roland had intimated.

"I'll just carry her up and get her settled," he told Adelina, avoiding Terric's amused gaze when his cousin entered the house.



* * *

Marguerite inhaled deeply. Her mother had warned her years ago that there was nothing men hated more than clingy, weeping women. Yet, she couldn't let go of Becket, even when he shouldered open the door to her chamber and carried her inside. "I can't stop trembling," she admitted, immediately regretting she'd revealed her

cowardice.

“It’s understandable,” he said as he perched on the edge of the enormous bed. “You’ve longed to return to England for more than two horrendous years. It must be overwhelming to think you are finally here.”

The fact she was still cradled in his arms gave her courage. “Perverse woman that I am, I can’t decide if I want to be here or not.”

She expected annoyance. He’d risked his life to bring her across the Narrow Sea and had pledged to take her through King John’s realm all the way to Cumbria. Instead, he chuckled. “It’s been a long journey. You’ll see things differently after a good night’s sleep.”

She’d slept for hours in the galley, but deemed it better not to mention she wasn’t tired, just strangely terrified. “Will you stay with me for a while?”

Ashamed of the brazen request, she risked looking into his eyes, relieved when she glimpsed uncertainty.

“I want to,” he admitted, “but Adelina will be sending a maid to tend to your needs.”

Marguerite remembered a female voice. “Terric’s wife must think me ignorant. I didn’t thank her or even utter a greeting.”

“Adelina understands. And she is Terric’s sister. He isn’t married. You’ll get to meet them properly on the morrow.”

He set her on the mattress beside him and stood. “Sleep well,” he whispered, cupping her face.

She grasped his hand. “I’m sorry,” she murmured into his palm.

“As am I,” he replied, meshing his fingers with hers.



* * *

The temptation to climb into bed with Marguerite was powerful.

However, it was doubtful he'd be able to lie beside her and not become aroused. His greedy manhood was already urging him on. He might slake his lust, but where would that leave them? He could not forsake his honor, nor dishonor her. "Terric is waiting for me downstairs," he told her, kneeling to remove her sand-caked shoes.

He dragged off her damp stockings, not daring to reach further up her slim legs for garters. Keenly aware she watched him, he stared at her bare feet for longer than was appropriate. Before he did something they would both regret, he blew the remaining grains of sand from between her elegant toes then lifted her legs so she lay flat on the bed.

She pursed her lips but, if he kissed her, all thoughts of honor might flee. "Good night, Marguerite," he rasped.

"Good night, Becket," she sighed.

Adelina

Terric handed Becket a tumbler of apple brandy as soon as he got to the foot of the stairs. "Thought you could use this," he quipped with a smile.

Becket accepted it gratefully, swigging the welcome liqueur down in one. "There's another cask on board for you. I forgot to bring it in the rowboat."

"You had your hands full," his cousin remarked, ushering him into the great room. "Sit. Tell me what's happening."

Becket recounted the whole story, making no mention of his growing attraction to Marguerite.

"We know about the fall of Gaillard, of course," Terric replied. "King John is livid. We've already had tax collectors here informing us of new levies on just about everything."

"But no threat of confiscating your property."

"Not yet. And John has enough problems with unhappy barons at the moment. However, he won't think twice about executing any Norman his men happen upon."

"Which makes getting Marguerite to Cumbria all the more difficult."

"You cannot be thinking of going with her," Terric exclaimed.

Becket gritted his teeth. "I must see her safely delivered."

Terric shook his head. "Mayhap Roland was right. You care about this woman."

Montbryces had always been truthful with each other. Terric might be younger than Becket, but he was intelligent and insightful. "Is it that obvious?"

His cousin shrugged. "So, why bring her to England?"

"She wanted to return. She doesn't reciprocate my feelings."

Terric snorted. "I suppose that's the reason she clung to you as if her life depended on it."

"It's complicated."

"You're just afraid of being hurt again," his cousin replied.

"That's the trouble with you Englishmen," he retorted. "You're too damn perceptive."

They shared the humor until Terric sobered. “Seriously, it might take me some time to gather enough men willing to escort Marguerite north, but it’s unlikely you would make it to Cumbria alive. Without you, what chance would Marguerite have? John has spies everywhere. He’s even got longboats patrolling along this coast, convinced there will be a Norman invasion.”

“Now, that’s ironic. The Conqueror must be chuckling in his tomb.”

“It might be amusing, but your galley can’t stay out there too long, for all our sakes.”



* * *

Marguerite narrowed her eyes at the stranger looking back at her from the mirror as the maid prepared her for bed. The serving girl probably thought she was waiting on a simpleton. She was brushing Marguerite’s hair, oohing and aahing over the color and length when a young woman entered after tapping at the door.

Her silk gown with matching slippers spoke of wealth and rank, so Marguerite assumed the newcomer was Becket’s cousin. She dismissed the servant as she stood and bowed her head. “I apologize for my earlier behavior,” she said. “I was disoriented.”

“Think nothing of it. You’ve had a long journey. I’m Adelina de Quincey, by the way.”

“Terric’s sister,” Marguerite replied.

“I too apologize for the confusion about the chambers,” Adelina said.

Marguerite seemed to recall something of the sort when they’d arrived but the exact details eluded her.

Adelina blushed, her eyes fixed on her feet. “Roland’s missive led us to believe you were Becket’s betrothed, so we assumed...”

Marguerite wondered why Roland had sent such a missive and

wished she wasn't having this conversation dressed in a borrowed nightgown. "We are, or were," she tried. "It was a subterfuge."

Frowning, Adelina ushered her to sit in one of the upholstered chairs by the hearth. "I don't understand. Becket seemed very concerned with your welfare when you arrived."

"He is. He has risked a great deal by seeing me safely to England."

Adelina fidgeted with the lace of her sleeves. "I'm afraid I don't understand any of this, but it isn't my place to pry. Becket will one day be head of the Montbryce clan and we've always trusted his judgement. I came to make sure you are comfortable."

There was something about this fresh-faced young woman that invited confidence, but Marguerite was too exhausted to tell the convoluted tale. "It's complicated. On the morrow, I'll perhaps be able to explain everything. In the meantime, tell me about this wonderful house."

"But you are tired."

"I slept for most of the voyage, so I'm fine."

"Well, Melton Manor was built long before the Conqueror came with his Normans."

Marguerite sympathized. Her parents' home dated from about the same time. "It was a Saxon holding?"

"Yes. After the Conquest, a brute of a Norman usurped the house and claimed it as his own. He forced my great, great grandmother, Devona, into a sham marriage. Fortunately, the Conqueror rewarded overlordship of several Sussex manors to his champion Ram de Montbryce who in turn assigned Melton to his brother, Hugh."

The story was beginning to sound familiar. "Hugh realized something was wrong and rescued your grandmother."

"By using the secret passage down to the beach," Adelina exclaimed, her eyes sparkling.

Marguerite frowned when the girl immediately clamped her hands over her mouth and admitted, "I'm not supposed to say anything about that."

"I'm intrigued," Marguerite confessed, "but why is it a secret?"

"Only members of the family know of its existence," Adelina whispered. "Nobody has used it for four generations but the head of the family is charged with making sure it is accessible should we ever need to escape the house."

“Do you know how to get into it?” Marguerite asked.

“I’ve never ventured there myself. I have a fear of spiders and such. But the entry is behind the pantry. Please don’t tell anyone I told you.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” Marguerite assured her, tucking the knowledge away. If she couldn’t dissuade Becket from attempting the journey to Cumbria, the passageway might provide a means to leave Melton Manor and make her own way home.

The Galley Has Gone

Having declined Terric's offer of a manservant to act as his valet, Becket wearily stripped off his clothes and boots.

The big bed looked inviting and he was certainly exhausted but, as he stretched out and pulled the linens to his chin, he acknowledged the plans teeming in his brain wouldn't allow him to sleep.

Terric had indicated it might take sennights to gather men for an escort. The longer the galley sat off shore, the greater the likelihood one of King John's patrols would spot it. He could take his crewmen north as an escort, but that would put all their lives at risk. Roland would insist on going with him, which he couldn't allow. Similarly, if Terric's men were stopped and found to be escorting a Norman, they too would be arrested and probably charged with treason. Whereas, if they were simply escorting John's cousin...

Reason dictated it would be wiser to return to Normandie and give responsibility for Marguerite over to others. His heart urged him to stay with her as long as possible. He didn't want to say goodbye.



* * *

Worn out with trying to devise a plan to travel the length of King John's England, Marguerite finally fell asleep without reaching a solution to her dilemma.

Dawn's weak light woke her. Though she was still half asleep, the truth suddenly struck her full force. For so long, she'd yearned to return to Cumbria, but the stark reality that there was no way to

travel safely no longer seemed to matter. More manipulation and years of frustration and resentment awaited her there. Becket's life was more important than Cumbria. The admission brought a measure of calm to her beleaguered heart.

Yawning, she slipped out of bed and went to the window. Her new-found sense of peace fled. Becket's galley was gone. She gripped the stone sill. "Surely he wouldn't leave without saying goodbye."

She dragged a blanket off the bed, swirled it around her shoulders and thrust open the door, gasping in alarm when a mastiff lumbered to its feet. Her breathing slowed as it came to her the dog had been guarding the door. "Have you been there all night?" she asked, letting the huge dog sniff her trembling fingers.

Apparently satisfied she was no threat, the mastiff trotted off, only to be joined by a second dog dislodged from his post when Becket appeared in an adjacent doorway. Overwhelming relief propelled her into his arms. "The galley's gone," she cried. "I was afraid..."



* * *

Becket filled his senses with the familiar perfume of the sobbing woman in his arms. He too was perturbed by the disappearance of the galley, but Marguerite could only be upset because she thought he had left. "I'm still here," he said softly. "Roland has probably sought a hidden cove. He wouldn't just abandon us."

Her sobs gradually subsided, but she still clung to him. "I thought you had gone," she admitted.

"I would never leave without saying goodbye," he said. "You know me better than that."

He stroked her hair, freeing the burnished tresses caught under the blanket. As the wool slipped from her shoulders, his body

responded predictably to the soft curves pressed against him.

He was awash in lavender and lust when a polite cough drew his attention.

“I sent men out last night to warn Roland,” Terric explained, a silly grin on his face. “They guided the galley to a well-hidden cove.”

Inappropriate as the situation was, Becket held on to Marguerite. She kept her head tucked against his chest, seemingly reluctant for them to part.

“My thanks, cousin,” Becket replied. “Marguerite thought I had left.”

Terric arched a brow, but then his smile fled. “You need to make some decisions today. The Lallements have sent word. They are part of King John’s entourage, though it’s a duty they loathe. The king arrived at Hastings Castle last night.”

Becket inhaled deeply. How to tell Marguerite her cousin was just a few miles away? He doubted King John was aware two Montbryce ancestors had married into the Lallement family generations ago.

Two Choices

If Marguerite absorbed enough of Becket's strength, her problems would all melt away, as if by magic. The proof he cared for her lay in the hard male member pressed against her and in the gentle, suggestive movement of his hips. That was all she'd ever wanted—a noble man to love and cherish her. Perhaps...

Terric's presence barely registered, but his words had an immediate effect on Becket. She felt him withdraw. "What is it?" she asked.

"King John is at Hastings Castle."

A cold shiver stole up her spine. "That's not far from here."

"About sixty miles. He's apparently worried about a French invasion and is touring strongholds on the south coast."

"Which means..."

Becket pulled the blanket over her shoulders. "Get dressed. We'll discuss strategy while we break our fast."

Retreating into the blanket to ward off a sudden chill, Marguerite averted her gaze and stepped away from Becket. She feared he might see the despair in her eyes. Sick at heart, she hurried to her chamber. For one, brief, glorious moment she'd thought she had found the solution to her troubles, but John had once more intervened to thwart her happiness. There was no escape.

Becket had spoken of strategy. What the lonely woman inside her wanted was to hear words of love and a reassurance he would protect her as his wife.

While the maidservant helped her dress and prepare for the day, she plotted how she might flee to Hastings. Surrendering to the king's will was the only way to protect Becket and spare Melton Manor from the tyrant's ire.



* * *

“As I see it,” Terric began, “Marguerite has two choices.”

Becket shifted in his seat at the high table in the great room. “I’d prefer we wait until she arrives.”

Terric shrugged. “We may as well eat while we wait,” he replied as he stood to help himself to the food set out on the servery.

His sister followed him.

Becket drummed his fingers on the table, impatient for Marguerite to arrive. After a few minutes, he joined Terric and Adelina at the servery.

Terric glanced at Becket’s trencher when the three returned to the table. “That’s not enough to feed a bird,” he quipped.

“I’ll have more of an appetite when we’ve settled on a plan.”

“Why not simply ask Marguerite to return to Normandie with you?” Terric asked.

“It’s more complicated than that,” Becket replied, though a part of him wondered what Marguerite’s reply would be if he proposed she consider marrying him.

“It can’t be any more complicated than the situation great, great grandfather Hugh faced,” Adelina pointed out. “He carried off his true love, though he risked the Conqueror’s wrath by doing so.”

There was a time when Becket would simply have told Adelina she had too much faith in romantic love but, now, he paused, confused by conflicting emotions. Why was he afraid to reveal his feelings?

He knew the answer and cursed Paulina. But Marguerite wasn’t Paulina.

“King John isn’t the Conqueror,” Terric added. “He’d have no power over you in Normandie.”

Becket grimaced. “But then there’s Philip of France.”

“How can the French king ever prove Marguerite is related to John?”

His patience at an end, Becket threw down his napkin. "I'll see what's keeping her."

Adelina rose. "I'll go. Try not to look so agitated when she arrives."

Becket sipped his ale. It was time he stopped acting like a jilted lover. He was a man with a man's needs, and Marguerite had reawakened those needs. She was courageous and intelligent. His parents liked her. He was confident she would make a good *comtesse*.

His breathing slowed, the tension leaving his shoulders now he'd arrived at a decision. He would persuade Marguerite to return...

"She's gone," Adelina shouted as she rushed back into the great room, her face flushed.

Becket leaped to his feet, his heart in knots. "Gone where?" he asked, though he knew the answer.



* * *

Marguerite had never stolen a horse and deeply regretted taking the finest animal in Terric de Quincey's stables. The only thing she knew for sure about Hastings Castle was its location on the coast east of Melton Manor. Galloping toward the early morning sun, she hoped a head start and a powerful horse would prevent Becket from halting her flight. He'd be relieved she had fled, allowing him to be rid of her and return safely to Normandie.

Unfortunately, she was also riding into a chilly wind, which explained the tears blurring her vision.

Riding at speed along an unfamiliar coastal path that wound its way atop steep cliffs required more concentration than galloping across open moors.

She rode past imposing seaside manors and through twisting village laneways, refusing to acknowledge the lunatic hope that

Becket would come in pursuit, that he did care.

At one point she thought she heard hoofbeats behind her, but was too afraid to look back.

When a hand reached for the reins and pulled her horse to a shuddering halt, all she could do was surrender to the grief welling up in her heart.

Sobbing, she went willingly when Becket pulled her from the horse.

“Don’t ever give me such a scare again,” he rasped, crushing her in his embrace.

“It’s...for the best...if I go to John,” she stammered.

“No, it’s not,” he retorted. “I would never forgive myself if that tyrant held sway over you.”

“But why?”

He put his hands on her shoulders, held her away from his body and looked into her eyes. “Because I’m in love with you, foolish woman.”

Stunned speechless by his profession of love, Marguerite surrendered to his kiss, unable to stem the tears of joy streaming down her face.

Confessions

Relief flooded Becket. He was perversely glad Marguerite had fled, thus forcing him to admit his feelings. As their tongues mated, he hoped his kiss proved the depth of his love. He had to assume happiness was the reason for her tears. He brushed them away with his thumbs when they broke apart. "We must return to Melton Manor. It's too exposed here."

Swallowing hard, she nodded. "I stole a horse," she confessed.

They weren't the words of love he'd hoped for, but she was clearly distraught.

"Promise me you won't run again if I let you ride the horse?"

"I promise," she replied, closing her eyes. "The thought of King John..."

As he lifted her into the saddle, the disgust in her voice led him to believe the tyrant king had much to do with the unhappiness he'd always sensed in her. "Then why flee to him?" he asked as he mounted his own horse.

"For your sake," she admitted, meeting his gaze. "I love you too much to risk exposing you to John's cruelty."

Becket looked out at the waves crashing on the beach below and inhaled the salty air. He'd never imagined his life would change dramatically on a windswept cliff on England's south coast. He could scarcely believe Marguerite d'Aigremont was the unlikely woman who would free him from years of self-doubt.

However, as they set off at a gallop, he chided himself. If he'd admitted his feelings earlier, they would never have left Normandie.

The admonition only strengthened his determination to do everything in his power to ensure he and Marguerite survived to enjoy a happy life together.



* * *

Marguerite couldn't meet Terric's gaze as he helped her dismount. "I stole your horse. I'm sorry."

To her surprise, he grinned. "I'm simply glad Becket caught up with you, and not because of the horse."

She was further surprised when Adelina rushed to embrace her. "Thank goodness, you're safe."

Marguerite looked over Adelina's shoulder into the eyes of the man she loved. He must have sensed her confusion. "My cousins knew we loved each other before we did," he quipped, taking her hand. "Now, we can make plans to get back to Normandie."

Terric slapped him on the back. "The servants should have the midday meal ready. We can talk while we eat."

"Good," Becket replied as they entered the house. "I was called away unexpectedly and had to miss breaking my fast. I'm starving."

There was a time Marguerite would have flinched at the offhand remark, but she attempted a smile. "So am I," she said. "I was too nervous to eat."

Her heart fluttered when Becket raised her hand to his lips. "I apologize. That was a thoughtless remark."

She shook her head as she took her seat next to Becket. "I have to learn to put the past behind me."

Still holding her hand, he chuckled. "As do I."

She took a risk. "Paulina?"

He let out a long, slow breath. "She left me for another."

Had he loved her?

"And broke your heart."

"In retrospect, I think my pride was more injured than my heart."

"Perhaps we can help each other overcome the trials of the past," she whispered.

"I cannot help you unless I know what made you unhappy."

There's more to it than the siege."

She realized she had to be truthful, but she didn't want Becket to think less of her. "In Cumbria, I am known as the woman who has been betrothed more times than anyone in history."

"I don't understand."

"King John has refused to sanction any of the suitors I've been betrothed to."

He frowned. "Did he consider them unworthy?"

"Some of them may have been unsuitable, but I came to believe John would never give permission for me to marry anyone."

"That's the reason you traveled to Gaillard."

"He dangled a suitor he approved of, although I doubt the man existed. If he did, he never came to Gaillard. It's the kind of cruel torment John delights in. If I'd married without his permission, he would have imprisoned me, and probably my parents, in the Tower."

He averted his gaze. "Were you ever betrothed to a man you wanted to marry?"

"No," she replied honestly. "I've never felt for any man what I feel for you."



* * *

Feeling giddier than a man his age should, Becket turned to Terric. "The best plan is to bring the galley out of hiding under cover of darkness."

"Agreed," his cousin replied. "Tonight, I'll send men to alert Roland. With John in the vicinity, there's no point delaying."

"I'm afraid," Marguerite admitted. "It's hard to believe I might, at last, escape my cruel cousin."

Becket took her hand. "I admit I didn't see it at first, but we were meant to meet at Gaillard. I'm not going to allow King John to

come between us.”

As the meal progressed, Becket contemplated the future. He could clearly envision Marguerite seated by his side at the high table in Montbryce Castle, the pair of them overseeing noisy celebrations. There'd be children too, little ones for him and his wife to love and cherish. A new life awaited. All they had to do was get back to Normandie.

Now, I Know

Marguerite was glad of Terric's suggestion everyone get some rest in preparation for the night's adventure but, when Becket escorted her to her chamber, she decided to be honest. "I'm afraid to be alone," she whispered. "Lie with me."

He inhaled deeply, his frown betraying uncertainty. "I'd like nothing more than to hold you in my arms, but..."

"Please," she begged. "Unless Terric and his sister will be offended."

Becket chuckled as he opened the door, took her hand and led the way. "I doubt that. They were expecting us to share a chamber. As you know, in England, a betrothed couple are already considered man and wife."

"We've never been formally betrothed."

He placed her hand over his heart. "Then I pledge myself to you now, Marguerite d'Aigremont, as God is my witness."

She'd heard the words before, but never spoken with such conviction. She splayed her hands on his chest, looked into the depths of his blue eyes and promised, "I pledge myself to you, Becket de Montbryce, as God is my witness."

She stood on tiptoe as he cradled her face in his hands and bent his head to kiss her. It wasn't their first kiss but, now, knowing he loved her, she held nothing back. She pressed her breasts to his chest, her mons to his maleness, and surrendered completely to the wanton feelings. She suckled his tongue, savored the wine they'd drunk and inhaled the intoxicating scent of an aroused male. She let him breathe for her as she explored the warm textures of his mouth. When he entwined his fingers in her hair, her hips instinctively matched the rhythm he set.

She shivered with longing when he kissed the side of her neck, then her forehead, then the hollow of her throat.

Her nipples tingled, urging his mouth lower as she arched her back. She groaned when his hand wandered to her breast; an aching need blossomed deep in her womb.

"I want you," he rasped.

"I am yours," she replied, lost to the sensations when his thumb grazed her nipple.

She feared she'd gone too far when he held her away and looked into her eyes. "You will be mine completely, but not until we marry. For now, there are ways to bring each other pleasure. Will you let me show you?"

Marguerite nigh on swooned with happiness. She'd long harbored a dream of marrying a man who would patiently teach her how to please him. "Show me," she echoed.



* * *

The urge to join his body to Marguerite's was powerful, but Becket recognized the need to be gentle. She had never experienced sweet loving.

He was beginning to think she hadn't been violated during the siege, but couldn't be sure. The real possibility enraged him, but he would never blame her. He wanted to be the first man to breach her maidenhead but, if he wasn't, it wouldn't be Marguerite's fault. His pride and his cock swelled at the prospect he'd be the first to bring her pleasure. Her response when he lightly touched her nipple led him to believe she was a woman with deeply buried passions, and he was just the man to unleash them.

Locking his gaze with hers, he eased the gown off her shoulders, kissed her there, then gentled the fabric down to reveal her breasts. The bounty that spilled into his hands played havoc with his resolve.

Her nipples were two little nutmegs ripe for the plucking, the haloes darker than he'd expected. He cupped her breasts in his hands, suckled one nipple and pinched the other.

It was as if he'd lit the touch paper to a firework. Marguerite tangled her fingers in his hair, pulling his head closer. Her throaty

moans ignited a firestorm in his loins. If he didn't slow down...

He scooped her up and carried her to the bed. What he intended was risky. He'd have to keep a tight rein on his rampant cock, but he sensed Marguerite was close to releasing. The compulsion to witness what he believed would be her first sexual release spurred him on.

"Trust me," he rasped as he pushed up her skirts and bared her most intimate place to his gaze.

Her nod of assent and the love in her eyes humbled him. He'd done little to earn this woman's trust.

His rock-hard cock insisted it wanted to plunge into the glistening pink sheath, but he had to be content with delaying that gratification. "Soon," he rasped, doubtful she'd heard him as he put his mouth on her womanhood and tasted her honey. He curled his arms around her thighs as she writhed, chanting his name—until he touched his tongue to the diamond of her desire and she stopped breathing.



* * *

Marguerite wasn't immediately sure who was wailing. One minute she was gasping for breath, the next she was flying over a rainbow as rapture flooded her body. "Becket," she murmured as he gathered her in his arms.

"You are beautiful," he said hoarsely.

She opened her eyes, at a loss for words when she gazed into blue eyes full of love—and need.

She plucked up her courage and reached between them to place her hand over his manhood. His sharp intake of breath and the swollen flesh beneath her fingers betrayed how difficult it had been for him to hold back. Thanks to her older brother's boasting of his prowess, she knew enough to be aware a man's sexual needs

weren't the same as a woman's. "Show me how to satisfy you," she whispered, nibbling his earlobe.

"*Non*," he replied. "I can wait."

She raised up on one elbow and moved her hand to the laces of his leggings. "You have gazed upon a part of my body even I have never seen. I long to see you."

He closed his eyes and clenched his jaw.

"Trust me," she whispered, pulling loose the laces.

She startled when he groaned, lifted his hips and shoved off his leggings. Moved by the longing in his eyes and awed by the proud lance that sprang free, she instinctively curled her hand around the thick length. "Show me," she said, coming to her knees beside him.

"Move on me, like this," he said, covering her hand with his.

Soon, he let his arms fall to his sides as she matched the rhythm he set.

His breathing gradually quickened, his nostrils flared, he growled deep in his throat. A pulse began between her legs and her nipples tingled as she watched him approach some sort of climax.

"Faster, Marguerite," he growled, gripping the linens.

She stared in fascination when his body convulsed and his seed erupted from the swollen tip of his manhood, the warmth coating her fingers.

He stayed the movement of her hand. "One day," he promised, "I'll spill inside you."

She kissed his lips with all the love she could muster. "I won't be able to see what happens then," she replied. "Now, I know."

No Escape

For the remainder of the afternoon, Becket and Marguerite each learned what pleased the other. Sated after hours of sexual delights, Becket wished he could simply fall asleep with his beloved in his arms.

As the shadows lengthened, he reluctantly got out of bed, cleansed himself with water from the ewer and dressed. He brought the washcloth to the bed and cleansed Marguerite, tempted to forget returning to Normandie when he saw the lust smoldering in her eyes. "I'll send a maid to help you dress. Come down when you are ready. I want to discuss last minute details with Terric before we take our leave."

She cradled his face in her hands and kissed him lovingly. "I can't bear to spend a minute apart from you."

The taste of his own essence on her lips nigh on undid him, but he satisfied his desire by kissing a pouting nipple before he left.

He and Terric arrived in the great room at the same time.

"I trust you spent a pleasant afternoon, cousin," Terric quipped with a wink.

Becket punched his shoulder. "Wait until you're in love."

Terric feigned injury. "I doubt that will ever happen. Seriously, though, I'm happy for you. I worried when Paulina..."

"So did I," Becket confessed.

"I sent the men out to alert Roland. They'll be back any time now, and the galley should be here shortly after dark."

"Good, Marguerite is dressing for the journey. I should have asked your men to bring the cask of apple brandy from the galley."

Terric looked sheepish. "I did mention it, since you seemed preoccupied with other things."

Becket slapped him on the back. "Rogue. I'll go down to the beach when they return and bring it up for you."

"No need. The men can fetch it."

"I insist. It's the least I can do in return for your hospitality."

Terric pointed to a large hamper sitting on a trestle table. "Take that then. One less thing to carry when you leave."

“What’s this?”

“Enough food for the voyage.”

Nodding his thanks, Becket hefted the hamper and headed for the steps down to the beach.

Terric's men were pulling the dingy up on shore when he arrived. He wasn't sure of the identity of the third man with his foot on top of a small cask until he got closer. “Roland,” he exclaimed over the roar of the surf.

“I came to give you a hand,” his brother explained, taking the hamper and stowing it in the rowboat. “And to see our precious brandy safely to shore. To be honest, waiting was driving me out of my wits. Marguerite’s coming back with us?”

“She is. It’s a long story.”

“I’m glad you both came to your senses before it was too late.”

“Very funny,” Becket replied, hoisting the cask on to his shoulder. “Wait for me here while I deliver this and fetch Marguerite.”

He and Terric's men were part way up the steps when he heard Roland yelling. Turning, he saw his brother pointing frantically to the top of the steps. Though he couldn't see the platform at the top, the thunder of hooves shook the very wood on which he stood. “*Fyke*,” he swore, almost dropping the cask into the arms of one of his companions. “A large contingent of men on horseback can mean only one thing.”

The man nodded. “Go, *milord*. We’ll draw them away from the steps. You’re no use to Lady Marguerite if the king claps you in irons.”

Sick at heart, he turned and rushed back to the beach. He and Roland shoved the rowboat into the surf and rowed frantically against the incoming tide and away from the woman he loved. “I can’t leave her at the mercy of King John,” he gasped breathlessly as crewmen helped them climb aboard the galley. Willing hands took the hamper and hefted it onto the deck.

“We won’t,” Roland replied, “but, right now, we must retreat to the cove.”



* * *

Adelina entered the chamber just as the maid was inserting the last of dozens of pins into Marguerite's hair.

"That should hold it in the wind, my lady," the girl declared.

"Your tresses are lovely, Marguerite," Adelina said, taking hold of her hands. "As are you. I'm so glad you're joining our family."

It was difficult to hold back tears as they embraced. "I'm sorry we won't get a chance to spend more time together," Marguerite said.

Adelina stroked her back. "One day, we'll be rid of King John and the nightmare of his reign will be over."

"It can't come soon enough," she replied.

Adelina drew her to the window and rolled up the leather covering. "It's impossible to see in the darkness, but your galley is out there."

Marguerite narrowed her eyes and looked down at the beach. "Is that Becket and Roland?"

They hugged, both trying to see through the narrow slit.

"Looks like Becket is bringing up the cask of apple brandy," Adelina said.

They lost sight of him as he strode to the steps.

"I'll go down to meet him," Marguerite declared, her heart turning somersaults.

"Wait," Adelina said. "Roland's yelling. Something's wrong."

Moments later, Marguerite's heart broke when dozens of horses thundered into the courtyard below. "John," she rasped, grabbing Adelina's hand, praying the man she loved would evade the tyrant whose cruel grasp she herself would never escape.

Keep Calm

"We must keep calm," Adelina urged.

Marguerite inhaled deeply. Her cousin's arrival wasn't a catastrophe for her alone. It signaled danger for the family who dwelt at Melton Manor. Panic would help no one.

Frantic barking drew her attention back to the window. English soldiers swarmed through the courtyard, one group accosting Terric's men at the top of the steps.

"Landry has the cask," Adelina said. "That must mean Becket and Roland have fled in the rowboat."

That Becket had escaped brought Marguerite some consolation. "Be well, my love," she whispered.

"I must go to my brother's side," Adelina declared.

Marguerite couldn't hide from John indefinitely. If her presence was discovered, the king's ire for the deed would be directed at the de Quinceys. It would raise suspicions she'd prefer to avoid. "I will come with you."

They hurried downstairs and were curtseying deeply with heads bowed when John strode into the entryway.

Out of the corner of her eye, Marguerite saw Terric go down on one knee before his king.

"Welcome, Your Majesty. We are humbled you have chosen to visit Melton Manor."

"Get up, de Quincey," John hissed, peeling off his gauntlets and flinging them at a knight standing beside him. "We're famished. Introduce these women then lead the way to the food."

Terric took Adelina's hand. "My sister, Adelina."

Marguerite feared her cousin might hear the rapid tattoo of her heart, although he was probably too busy ogling Adelina, a girl young enough to be his daughter.

"And recently arrived," Terric said, taking her hand, "Marguerite d'Aigremont, your kinswoman."

Swallowing the lump of dread in her throat, she stood, lifted her chin, and looked John in the eye. "Well met, Your Majesty."

A myriad of emotions played on John's face. Shock? Anger?

Delight? It had always been impossible to discern if her cousin was pleased, or plotting some diabolical deed.

She had to be satisfied the omnipotent tyrant was apparently at a loss for words, if only for a moment.

However, he quickly composed himself. “Marguerite, dear cousin. How is it you are here?”

The damage this man had inflicted on her for years strengthened her resolve to give the best performance of her life.



* * *

Seething with anger and frustration, Becket paced the deck of the galley. Only he, Roland and their captain remained on board after the crew waded through the shallow waters of the cove to make camp on shore.

“I regret it will be a cold night without a campfire,” Becket remarked, bitterly aware the men had expected to be well on their way home.

“They understand,” Drabeau replied.

“We’re safe here for the moment,” Roland said. “Our lookouts report the patrols go by in the main channel very infrequently—only once since we arrived.”

“But the king is in residence at Melton now,” Becket pointed out. “I’ve heard he always travels with his treasury, so they’ll likely increase their vigilance. We must somehow evade them and return to rescue Marguerite.”

“If John was at Hastings,” Roland remarked, “he is probably on his way to Arundel Castle. I doubt he’ll stay here long.”

Becket raked his fingers through his hair, Marguerite’s whimpers of ecstasy echoing in his memory. “You might be right, but he’s unpredictable. And he might decide to take her with him. In fact, I’d say it’s more than likely. He relishes the power he has over her.”

“She told you then? About the betrothals?”

The compulsion to punch his brother’s nose faded quickly. He had only himself to blame for Marguerite’s fear of confiding in him.



* * *

Marguerite faltered momentarily when John insisted she sit beside him at the high table in Melton’s great room. Then, she remembered the agonizing months of starvation and fear inside Gaillard.

At first, she marveled that Melton’s kitchens were able to produce copious amounts of food in only minutes. She quickly realized none of the estate’s retainers and household staff were in attendance. The food prepared for them would instead feed this pig of a king.

“So,” John oozed, stroking the back of Marguerite’s hand. “Tell me how it is you’re here.”

“It’s a sorry tale, Your Majesty,” she began, John’s beady-eyed ogling of her breasts suddenly reminding her of Vause.

“We have all night,” he countered.

“Unfortunately, I was in Gaillard Castle when the French laid siege.”

His eyes widened in seemingly genuine surprise. “What prompted you to go there?”

Her assumption was correct. She was a plaything John had tired of. “I was led to believe you had arranged a betrothal for me. I was to meet the man at Gaillard.”

He guzzled a hefty swig of wine. “News to me,” he lied.

She fisted her hands in her napkin. “Yes, I suspected you hadn’t sent me to such a dangerous place. I knew my cousin would never allow me to be trapped in a besieged castle.”

She fluttered her eyelashes, hopefully convincing him she was

simply a dimwitted female.

“Of course not,” he belched. “You’re well past marrying age. But you escaped, I suppose.”

“When the castle fell, I was smuggled out in the guise of a nun. A Norman officer agreed to let me accompany several orphans to his castle.

“When I insisted on returning to England, his family provided a galley and brought me here. I arrived just hours before you. I knew you would want to see me safely returned to my parents, but I fretted over how I might reach you—and here you are. Serendipity.”

John drained his goblet. “Fortuitous! I was on my way to Arundel and decided to stop here.” He turned to Terric. “I suppose these *honorable* Normans were your kin?”

“Indeed,” Terric replied. “They also brought a cask of the famous Montbryce apple brandy.”

John banged his goblet on the table. “Well, waste no more time. I’ve heard it’s the best in Normandie, but is it fit for a king?”

“Only you can be the judge, Your Majesty,” Terric replied, beckoning a servant.

“And where are these *noble* Norman traitors now?” John sneered.

“They deemed it wiser not to linger,” Terric replied without hesitation, even risking a wink.

Apparently satisfied, John guffawed, swigged back the tumbler of liqueur in one gulp and called for another.

Practice Makes Perfect

It was well after midnight, but John was still haranguing anyone still awake about the treacherous Normans who'd betrayed him and allowed Gaillard to fall into French hands.

Terric listened to the rant with a bemused smile on his face.

Adelina had dozed off with her head leaning against Marguerite's shoulder.

She herself fought a losing battle against exhaustion and despair. She desperately hoped Becket hadn't sailed away to Normandie without her.

Finally unable to stand any more of the monster's diatribe, she stretched her arm around Adelina and cleared her throat. "Forgive me, Majesty," she murmured.

"What?" John snarled.

"I request permission to see this child to bed. I myself am tired, and..."

"Granted," he huffed with a dismissive wave. "Be ready to leave at dawn."

"Leave?"

Anger reddened his already ruddy face. She should have known better than to question him.

Averting her gaze to avoid angering him further, she hurriedly roused Adelina and supported her weight as they careened out of the great room.



* * *

Attempting to rescue Marguerite from under King John's nose

bordered on the insane, but Becket couldn't leave Marguerite in England. "If he takes her to Arundel, I'll never see her again," he rasped between gritted teeth as he and Roland rowed away from the hidden cove.

"You're preaching to the converted," his brother replied, pulling on his oar.

"Sorry. I'm just anxious."

"What's our plan?"

"The secret passage is the best hope."

"Agreed. Do you know how to get into it?"

"In the cave, though exactly where..."

"It's going to be a challenge in the dark, and we can't risk torches."

They pulled the rowboat out of the water below the cliffs, out of sight of the house. Staying as close to the rock as possible, they hurried toward the cave, halting when they heard Terric's mastiffs barking.

Leaning against the cold rock, Becket breathed again when the barking ceased, irate voices faded and there was no sound of men descending the steep steps.

When he and Roland reached the mouth of the cave, he pressed a finger to his lips. "No talking once we are inside. The echo."

His brother nodded his understanding and they entered the cave.

Becket's heartbeat thudded in his ears as he paused, disoriented by the total blackness that swallowed them up.

Gradually, sounds penetrated—his brother's heavy breathing; waves lapping on the shore; the crunch of pebbles underfoot when he took a step forward.

His eyes took longer to get used to the darkness, but he could make out nothing besides sheer rock.

He inhaled deeply, trying desperately to recall the details of the oft-told tale of Hugh and Antoine's efforts to find the entrance to the secret tunnel. He knew the story but wished he'd paid more attention. One thing was for sure, the door wouldn't be near the opening of the cave.

The pebbles made for slow going as he moved forward with arms stretched out, feeling his way in the pitch black. He supposed Roland was depending solely on sound to stay close behind him.

After what seemed an eternity, he bumped into solid rock.

Bearing in mind the location of the manor house far above them, he decided to sidestep to the right.

He breathed a sigh of relief when his feet encountered an obstacle he hoped was the side of the steps leading to the hidden door.

Scrambling up like a crab, he felt for what he prayed was a doorway, elated when his hands touched damp wood.

His ancestors had great difficulty opening the secret door since it had been unused for centuries, but Becket knew Terric had kept the tunnel accessible. To his great relief, he located a handle of sorts, curled his hand around it and pulled.



* * *

Marguerite startled when Adelina suddenly came to life at the foot of the stairs and pressed a finger to her lips.

She took Marguerite's hand and led her through the kitchen to the larder where she pressed a scone on the rear wall.

A panel moved. They stepped through the opening into a hidden compartment. Adelina closed the panel, plunging them into complete darkness.

Marguerite's frantically beating heart slowed when it became clear Adelina knew what she was about. She struck a flint and soon had a candle lit. She thrust it into Marguerite's trembling hands and reached to claw at what looked like a solid wall. Seconds later, a stone came loose with a grinding sound. Adelina placed it carefully at their feet. Marguerite lifted the candle to reveal a lever inside the recess where the stone had been.

Adeline stood on the stone she'd removed and pulled the lever with both hands, grinning mischievously when a section of the wall slid aside and a narrow opening appeared. "Practice makes perfect," she whispered. "Now, go."

Too choked with gratitude to speak, Marguerite hugged her courageous companion, gathered up her skirts and stepped into the dark passageway.

Panic threatened as the wall slid back into place behind her. She lifted the candle and saw that the tunnel curved out of sight after a few yards.

The tunnel must lead to the beach. She didn't know what she would do once she reached the end, but anything was preferable to remaining at John's mercy. For the first time since her cousin's arrival, hope rose in her breast as she began the slippery descent.



* * *

Becket tensed when hinges squealed and wood scraped on stone. He'd opened the door just a crack, anxious not to cause a rush of air into the house, but the noise may have alerted the guards in the courtyard.

He belatedly realized he and Roland should have formulated a plan, but hadn't thought past getting into the tunnel. He stepped into the passageway, then turned to put a restraining hand on his brother's arm. There was no point both of them risking capture by King John's men.

Relieved when Roland didn't argue, he braced his hands against the walls of the tunnel and began the slippery ascent. If he recalled correctly, the other end came out behind the larder, but he had no idea how he would open the door there, particularly when it got darker and darker the further he went. "Guide me," he prayed, hoping the spirits of his long dead ancestors would hear his entreaty.

He stopped abruptly, holding his breath, listening intently when a light flickered up ahead. Eerie shadows played on the rock wall. His heart lurched. Someone was coming down the tunnel toward

him.

He waited, fighting the instinct to flee to the cave when he thought he detected a whiff of lavender. It was all he could do not to shout out his elation when Marguerite appeared, a candle held aloft and her dagger clenched between her teeth.

When the flickering flame fell on him, she paused. Her eyes widened as the fear left her face. The dagger clattered on the stone when she opened her mouth to speak.

He hurried forward and caught her as she stumbled toward him.

“Becket,” she breathed when he took her into his embrace. “You came for me.”

Flight

Marguerite clung to Becket's solid body and filled her lungs with his scent, not quite believing he had risked his life to come for her. Keeping an arm around her waist, he retrieved the dagger and handed it to her. Taking the candle from her trembling hand, he lit their way to the end of the tunnel, extinguishing the flame when they reached the cave. He passed her into Roland's keeping, then turned to pull a door closed behind them. The muffled thunk gave her courage. No one could follow.

Her heart was bursting with gratitude and love. There was so much she wanted to say, but her frantic brain couldn't marshal a coherent thought. Becket helped her navigate a set of slippery steps, then they staggered across a pebbly surface like drunkards before emerging into the fresh air.

Clouds obscured the moon, but it was easier to see than in the cave. Becket and Roland each took an arm and carried her across the wet sand to a rowboat.

Becket lifted her into the boat, then he and his brother shoved it out into the surf.

Shivering, she gripped the bench on which she sat, watching Becket and Roland pull on the oars as if the devil were in pursuit.

Afraid to look into the black, roiling depths, she kept her gaze locked with Becket's, taking strength from the determination in his narrowed eyes. The powerful arms of the well-muscled men soon carried them far from the beach and nearer to the galley.



Becket hoisted Marguerite into Drabeau's waiting arms, then climbed aboard the galley, confident Roland would see to setting the rowboat adrift.

The moment his feet hit the deck, he had his arms full as Marguerite sobbed into his chest. He stroked her damp hair, struck dumb by the reality she was safe. "You found the tunnel," was all he could think to say.

"Adelina showed me," she replied. "I hope she will not suffer for it."

"There will be repercussions when King John discovers you're missing," he confessed. "We hope the rowboat will be so badly damaged by the time it drifts ashore with the tide, he'll believe you've drowned trying to get away."

"He's totally convinced everything he does is right; he'll never understand why I would want to escape him."

"But Terric is canny. He can talk his way out of any tight situation."

"Canny? You sound like a Scot."

"A word I learned from my Scottish grandmother and my Cumbrian mother," he admitted with a chuckle.

She leaned her forehead against his. "Adelina was so brave. I think she enjoyed the adventure."

"She's grown up since the last time I saw her. It was also courageous of you to make the attempt. You couldn't know I was in the tunnel."

She shook her head. "True, but I had faith you wouldn't leave without me."

He craved a kiss to reassure himself she was truly there with him, but Drabeau robbed him of the opportunity.

"Ready to make sail," the captain called. "As soon as the tide turns."



Snuggled in Becket's arms under a makeshift shelter in the galley's stern, Marguerite dozed, unsure how much time had passed when the vessel's movement woke her.

"The tide has turned," Becket whispered. "We're on our way home."

Home.

Montbryce was a fortified castle in a foreign land thrown into turmoil after the fall of Gaillard. Yet, the notion it was to be her future home rang true and filled her heart.

It was still dark and she could barely make out the land on either side of a narrow channel through which they were sailing.

The only sound was the rhythmic splash of the oars being plied by the crew and the creaking of wood on wood. No one spoke. No lantern had been lit.

Marguerite felt the wind on her face as they pulled out of the cove. The sail was hoisted without word being given by the captain. She tensed when ropes and winches squealed, the noise seeming to echo off the water.

Voices carried on the wind. She looked up at Melton Manor atop the cliff. Torches danced in the courtyard. Men shouted. "They're looking for me," she whispered.

"Let them look," Becket replied, tightening his embrace.

Fretting about Terric and his sister, her heart lurched when Roland hissed, "English patrol."

Becket stood quickly and looked out to sea. "We'll outrun them," he commanded.



* * *

"They haven't seen us yet," Becket told Roland as they joined the oarsmen. "The racket up at the house has probably distracted them."

“Thanks be to God the wind’s filling the sail,” his brother replied.

It didn’t take long for strident shouting to alert them that they’d been spotted by the English vessel.

“Pull, lads,” Drabeau yelled. “She’s giving chase.”

The oarsmen had sailed together for years. They increased their pace, matching each other’s rhythm without the aid of a coxswain.

The outgoing tide aided both ships, but the English vessel eventually gave up the hunt. “They don’t want to stray far from the coast,” Becket said.

“Nor get too close to Normandie,” Roland replied.

Drabeau gave the command for the rowers to cease rowing, and they depended on the wind to take them safely across the Narrow Sea.

Appreciative of the seafaring skills handed down from the Viking ancestors of every man on board, Becket spent hours cuddling his shivering fiancée.

Preparations Underway

Becket's embrace was comforting, but Marguerite couldn't sleep. As the galley tossed on the waves, she sensed his determination to stay awake.

"I'm sorry I put all our lives in peril," she said. "If I'd been courageous enough to tell you how I felt..."

He touched a finger to her lips. "We are both guilty of that. Let's make a pledge we will always be truthful with each other in future."

"I pledge it willingly," she replied, humbled by the trusting nature of the man to whom she'd told too many lies.

"As do I," he promised. "Shall we seal the pledge with a sip of wine, or is your stomach too queasy?"

"So far, I seem to be a good sailor, but wine?"

He came to his knees, dragged over a large basket sitting nearby and removed the lid. "Terric had a hamper packed for us."

He extracted several bundles wrapped in cloth. Marguerite gasped with delight when they were unwrapped. "Roasted chicken, bread, apples, and cheeses," she exclaimed.

"And wine," he declared, holding aloft a flagon.

"I'm just in time."

Becket chuckled when Roland joined them under the canvas shelter. "My brother has an uncanny ability to sniff out food."

Huddled in blankets, the three shared a meal. The men made the effort to speak English and Marguerite took comfort in their thoughtfulness.

When they docked in the fishing village of Ouistreham, the mid-morning bustle made her feel alive and ready to face the future, even if it included the problem of King Philip of France.



* * *

The weather held as they sailed down the Orne. Becket sensed a new spirit of optimism in Marguerite. He handed the responsibility for steering the longboat over to Roland and beckoned her to join him at the prow. "Almost there," he said, putting an arm around her shoulders.

"Every ending is a new beginning," she replied, leaning into him. "I'm not afraid with you by my side."

"You will have the protection of my family," he assured her.

"I know," she replied.

He stayed with her until his help was required at the dock on the banks of the Orne. Horses were saddled quickly and they rode side by side to Montbryce. Roland and a mounted escort brought up the rear.

"No sign of the French yet," Becket said when the castle came in sight atop its promontory.

"I remember the first time I saw it," Marguerite said. "I was afraid then. Now, I feel I am coming home."

Elation soared in Becket's breast, but his joy was tempered by the activity they encountered in the bailey. Preparations for an important visitor were clearly underway. Men were white-washing stone walls. An army of broom-wielding women were sweeping away any sign of detritus. Livestock pens had been dismantled. New pennants flew from the battlements.

As Becket dismounted, Adrien hurried out of the keep to greet them. "We've received word. Philip has been welcomed in Rouen," he explained, looking askance at Marguerite before beaming a grin. Then, he sobered. "He intends to travel throughout Normandie, so he might be here in a few weeks, or a few days."

Becket reached up to assist Marguerite to dismount, relieved to see a brave smile.

"I have survived one tyrant," she told him. "Philip won't defeat

me.”



* * *

Marguerite found Adrien’s grin reassuring. He was evidently pleased she had returned to Montbryce. He shook Becket’s hand vigorously, but his news revived the turmoil in her belly. However, she’d known they would have to face the French king sooner or later.

Becket said nothing as he lifted her down from the horse.

Struggling to maintain her composure, she took courage from the strength of his hands on her waist. They stood together for brief moments until an enthusiastic crowd gathered, everyone expressing congratulations to a broadly smiling *vicomte*. She swallowed the lump in her throat when several of the orphans emerged and clung to her skirts. She stroked their heads, feeling more loved than she’d ever felt in her life.

The *comtesse*’s gleeful voice reached them. Swept along in the joyful homecoming, Marguerite was suddenly being kissed on both cheeks by Lady Hollis de Montbryce and ushered into the keep.

Bathing

Becket's father embraced his sons when they encountered him in the entryway to the keep. "Welcome home, boys," he rasped, clearly relieved to see them safely returned. He smiled at Marguerite, took her hand and brushed a polite kiss on her knuckles. "I am anxious to hear the whole story. However, I sense the three of you are exhausted."

"We are, Papa," Becket replied, snaking a protective arm around Marguerite's waist, lest his father misunderstand the reasons for her return. "With your permission, we will bathe and perhaps sleep for a while before joining you in your solar."

"Yes," his mother replied, still smiling at Marguerite. "We can be patient."

Bonhomme appeared. "I'll see to the provision of hot water right away and perhaps a tray of something to nibble on—to tide you over until the evening meal."

As far as Becket was concerned, Marguerite was already his wife. They had pledged to each other. However, informing the steward he intended to share his bath with his betrothed and nibble on something other than food might offend his parents.

"I think Becket and Lady Marguerite would prefer to share a chamber, Bonhomme," his practical mother suggested, surprising them all.

His father looked ready to object until Lady Hollis elbowed him into silence.

Roland shook his head, laughter in his eyes. "I'll retire to my lonely chamber."

"Thank you, *Maman*," Becket replied as he took a furiously blushing Marguerite by the hand.



* * *

“Your parents must be offended,” Marguerite said as they entered Becket’s chamber.

Shrugging off his doublet, he shook his head. “They understand. They fell in love at first sight.”

Marguerite wished they could say the same. “I suspect you didn’t like me much when we first met.”

He took her hand, a hint of mischief in his blue eyes. “In my defense, I thought you were an elderly nun and I was somewhat preoccupied with the survivors in the camp.”

“I don’t blame you,” she replied with a smile. “Even I found the worn habit repulsive.”

He pulled her into his arms. “Your disguise had me completely fooled,” he said softly.

“I admit I was attracted to you,” she confessed.

“Despite your feelings about my betrayal of King John,” he replied, arching an eyebrow.

Heat rose in her face. “I’ve spent so many years defending my odious cousin. It was a hard habit to break. However, I came to see that your actions were those of an honorable and compassionate man, unlike John, and certainly unlike Vause.”

He put his hands on her bottom and pressed her mons to his manhood. “I’m not feeling very honorable at the moment.”

A tapping at the door dissuaded her from surrendering to the wanton sensations coursing through her.

“Hot water,” Becket exclaimed, holding her firm when she tried to move away. “As soon as they saw you had returned, my parents realized I have given my heart,” he whispered. “Their acceptance will set the tone for everyone else at Montbryce. People will be happy for us.”

Inhaling deeply, she recognized the wonderful truth of his words. “You are a dream come to life.”

“Enter,” he shouted, pecking a kiss on her forehead.

Six scullery lads entered, four toting pails of steaming water, two bearing a huge wooden bathtub. They bowed respectfully before setting about their tasks.

“It’s the biggest tub I’ve ever seen,” she whispered close to Becket’s ear.

“I’m a big man,” he replied with a shrug.



* * *

Becket enjoyed Marguerite’s green eyes on him as he disrobed after the lads had left. His expectant cock twitched under her appreciative gaze. He ran his fingers through the water, then climbed into the tub and sank down with a contented groan.

When he opened his eyes, he was puzzled to see Marguerite rolling up her sleeves. “What are you doing, love?”

“I assumed you wanted me to scrub your back.”

“I do, but you’re not the daughter of the house and I’m not some visiting nobleman. Take off your clothes and join me. We’ll bathe each other.”

She hesitated. “I never...”

“Neither have I,” he replied truthfully, though it was something he’d dreamt of enjoying with a woman he loved. “The water’s good and hot.”

The errant thought occurred that he’d deprived himself of the pleasure of undressing her but, when she slipped off her shoes, rolled down garters and stockings, he relaxed. She managed to lift the gown over her head with some difficulty, but her struggles afforded him a wonderful view of her slim body.

She may as well have been naked, standing beside the tub in a silk chemise that clung to full breasts and pouting nipples. Taking pity on her uncertainty, he rose, and scooped her up. She squealed

when he sat down in the tub with her in his arms.

Shock soon turned to breathless laughter.

“I love the sound of your laughter,” he rasped. “But I like kissing more.”

His body reacted predictably when she needed no further encouragement.



* * *

Marguerite surrendered to the kiss, but giddy emotions still swirled in her heart. Life with Becket held the promise of so much more than she'd ever expected. Love, yes, but, clearly, he liked to tease and have fun.

He whipped off the sodden chemise in a trice and hurled it away. “That’s better,” he said. “Now, I can feel you.”

She came to her knees, splayed her hands on his chiseled chest and licked a nipple. He sucked in a breath. “Any more of that and I’ll lose my resolve,” he said, turning her so she sat between his legs with her back to him. “Just rest.”

She lay back, cradled in his arms, his maleness nestled against her bottom. Slowly, the tension eased from her body and the healing power of the hot water lulled her to sleep.

A Naked Valet

Becket wanted Marguerite—badly. However, knowing she would soon be his completely was enough for now. He was content to lie in the hot water with her breasts nestled in his hands. Each time he nibbled her shoulder or grazed a nipple with his thumb, her whimpers of delight echoed in his sac.

The tendrils of red glory that had come loose from the pins only added to the arousing allure of her graceful neck.

All too soon, the water cooled. He picked her up and strode out of the tub. She clung to him, shivering until he set her down, wrapped her in a towel and slowly dried every tempting curve. He was driving himself mad and relishing every second of his torment.

“You’re spoiling me,” she said, putting her hands on his shoulders to steady herself.

“It will be my life’s goal to spoil you,” he promised, resolved to make up for the lifetime of hurts she had endured.

She reached for a second towel and dabbed water from his chest, his arms, his shoulders. “Turn,” she commanded playfully, rubbing his back dry when he obeyed.

Falling to her knees, she dried his thighs, then his legs and feet. Clearly, she meant to prolong the torture. “You are beautifully made,” she said softly. “Like a statue of a Greek god.”

Feeling smugly magnificent and unable to put off the inevitable any longer, he turned to face her, elated when she kissed the tip of his rampant shaft and whispered, “Except you’re flesh and blood, and all mine.”



Straddling Becket's leg, Marguerite struggled to get his foot into a boot. After hours of intimacy, she was comfortable being naked with him.

"This is the first time I've helped a man dress," she offered by way of an excuse for the boot's recalcitrance.

"And I've never had a valet with such a tempting *derrière*," he countered with a chuckle. "Come to think of it, I've never had a naked valet."

"I should hope not," she replied with a gasp of relief when the foot slid into the boot.

He stood, held out his arms and asked, "How do I look?"

She raked her gaze over the black velvet doublet, woollen leggings and leather boots. "Sinful," she replied. "I'll be jealous of every woman who ogles your broad shoulders and powerful legs."

He gathered her into his embrace. "There's no need to be jealous. I'll be faithful to you. Although, I must admit, knowing a woman guards him jealously is good for a man's pride."

"I shall be ever vigilant," she quipped, cupping his bearded chin in her hands.

"I'll shave later," he promised, "we'd better get you to your chamber so you can dress. We are already late for our meeting with my parents."

"But I can't walk down the corridor like this," she protested.

Smiling, he retrieved a cloak from the armoire and furled it around her, closing the edges tightly across her breasts. "It isn't far," he said with a wink. "Don't worry. I too am jealous of what belongs to me. I'll make sure you get there safely."

He opened the door, looked both ways, picked her up, and left the chamber.

She tried hard not to laugh as he quickly covered the few yards to her chamber. She couldn't remember experiencing such mischievous joy, even as a child. She'd never been naughty in her life.

He maneuvered the door open, silencing her giggle with a kiss as he carried her into the chamber. Back on her feet, she snaked her arms around his neck and pressed her body to his as the kiss deepened.

She teased his tongue, reluctant to comply when he whispered, "Let's get you dressed, my lady."

They broke apart, startled when a little voice said, "I can take

care of that, *milord*.”



* * *

“Alys,” Becket exclaimed, determined to keep his hands on Marguerite’s hips. The servants may as well get used to his infatuation. “A thousand pardons. It’s a good thing you are here. I’d be woefully inadequate as a lady’s maid.”

The blushing servant bobbed a curtsy but made no reply.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered close to Marguerite’s ear. “Alys is a good girl.”

“I know,” she replied. “She won’t gossip.”

He fisted his hands in the folds of the cloak. “I don’t care if everyone in this castle knows their *vicomte* has finally fallen victim to the *curse* of the Montbryces.”

His beloved frowned, but Alys came to the rescue. “I can explain, my lady,” she said proudly. “The Montbryces have always been considered unusual among the nobility.”

“In what way?”

“The men are in love with their wives. It’s not really a curse.”

Marguerite looked puzzled for a few moments, then she smiled thoughtfully. “You’re right, I don’t know any married noblemen who love their wives. And most wives can’t abide their husbands.”

Feeling blessed he’d been born into a family that frowned on arranged marriages, Becket bowed and took his leave. He thanked God for his good fortune. Paulina’s betrayal had cut deep but, if she hadn’t abandoned him...

Called Away

After quickly stammering that a bath wouldn't be needed, Marguerite chose a gown from the same selection she'd been offered upon first arriving at Montbryce.

Alys didn't blink when the cloak was removed to reveal her nudity. She folded the garment carefully and muttered some remark about returning it to his lordship.

As she helped Marguerite dress and prepare for the meeting in the solar, the maid showed no sign of being shocked by the intimacy she had witnessed.

Only after declaring Marguerite ready, did she voice her thoughts. "I am very glad you came back to us, *milady*," she said with head bowed. "*Milord* Becket is a good man."

Marguerite took hold of the girl's hand. "Thank you. I only hope I can be worthy of him."

"I knew from the first time I saw you together that you love him. That's the important thing."

Sighing, Marguerite left the chamber, pleasantly surprised to see Becket waiting for her in the corridor.

"Heavy sighs," he whispered, taking her into his embrace.

"The little maid knows me better than I know myself," she confessed. "She knew I was in love with you before I admitted it to myself."

"Like Roland," he replied as he took her hand. "My brother recognized my feelings before I did."

"My stubborn pride almost cost us everything," she lamented as they walked toward the solar hand in hand.

"I'm equally guilty," he said, opening the door and ushering her inside.

"That sounds ominous," Becket's father remarked, stepping forward to shake his son's hand.

"Not at all," Becket replied. "We're just lamenting it took us so long to admit our feelings for each other."

His father lifted Marguerite's hand and brushed a kiss on her knuckles. "My *comtesse* and I didn't have that problem. Of course,

we were frantically trying to prevent an assassination; there was no time to waste.”

“And you two came to your senses in time,” Becket’s mother exclaimed as she embraced Marguerite.

“It took falling back into King John’s cruel grasp to make me realize what I truly wanted.”

“And I knew I couldn’t leave her in England,” Becket added.

Lady Hollis gestured to an armchair. “Roland told us most of the details while you were...er...getting ready.”

Heat flooded Marguerite’s face. The *comtesse* clearly suspected what they’d been up to. Becket’s wide-eyed grin only made matters worse.

“You were both very courageous to take the risks you did,” the *comte* declared.

“But that’s what love is all about, isn’t it?” Lady Hollis replied.

“It was Adelina’s courage that saved me,” Marguerite said. “I wouldn’t have found the hidden door to the passage without her help.”

“And so,” the *comte* observed, “for the second time in less than two hundred years, Melton Manor’s secret tunnel has saved the day.”

“I worry about John’s reaction,” Marguerite admitted. “There is no reason for him to be angry about my disappearance. I mean nothing to him, but he never needs a valid reason to be vindictive.”

“We have no control over that at the moment,” Lady Hollis said. “Terric will eventually send word of what transpired.”

“At this juncture,” the *comte* replied. “It’s Philip Augustus we need to be concerned about. I suggest we begin preparations for a wedding right away.”

Marguerite’s spirits lifted. She’d expected censure from Becket’s parents, but they’d accepted her, despite the danger she’d brought to their lives. They too recognized the love she bore their son.



Becket sensed his father had more to say and wasn't surprised when the topic of Alensonne came up.

"Our MacLachlainn kin are masters of Alensonne," he explained to Marguerite. "It's south of here."

"Sounds like an Irish name," she replied with a smile.

"Originally, it was. My great, great grandfather's daughter married an Irishman, Ronan MacLachlainn. *Tante Rhoni's* parents gave them Alensonne as a dowry gift. It's just one of the castles our family controls throughout Normandie."

He immediately regretted the words when the color drained from her face. "Don't feel overwhelmed. Normally, each castle runs independently of us. They all contributed soldiers to the siege and each contingent went its own way home after Gaillard fell."

"However," his father interjected, "the imminent French presence in Normandie changes things. We must ensure every one of our strongholds is properly prepared to deter any ideas of expropriation Philip harbors."

Becket knew what that entailed. As heir to the earldom, it was his responsibility to make sure the family's interests were protected. "Much as I hate to leave you, Marguerite," he said as he took her hand, "it's my duty to go as soon as possible."

"Of course," she replied, lifting her chin. "You won't be gone long, will you?"

She was trying to be brave, but he detected the catch in her voice. "A fortnight, I would guess."

"Enough time for us to plan a wonderful wedding," his mother interjected. "Assuredly, we'll make better progress without you as a distraction."

Her jest resurrected Marguerite's smile and restored the color to her cheeks.

"I'll ride with you," Roland insisted.

Becket nodded his appreciation. He didn't always approve of his younger brother's behavior, but Roland recognized where his responsibilities lay. "Your company would be welcome."

"Anything's better than getting roped into helping prepare for a wedding," his brother replied, winking at Marguerite.

She laughed in response.

Becket was pleased his betrothed and Roland got along, but was

ridiculously glad his philandering brother would be far away from his intended bride.



* * *

Marguerite lay atop Becket, wondering how she was going to survive a fortnight without him. They'd pleased each other for hours after retiring to his chamber. Lying naked with him now seemed a natural state of affairs. "I still cannot believe your parents are not outraged," she whispered.

"You're my wife," he replied, cupping her bottom, "especially now we have betrothal documents signed and sealed. Let's see, how many betrothals is that for you?"

She shrugged, determined not to rise to the bait. "I've lost count."

"Minx," he replied.

He'd intended his question as a jest, but a chill crept into her heart. "I hope this one actually results in a marriage."

He sat up and gathered her into his arms. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to resurrect old hurts."

"I simply wish you weren't going away. Your mother tried to explain where all your castles are located and who controls them but I admit I wasn't really listening."

"Alensonne you already know about. Domfort is ruled by descendants of the same Hugh de Montbryce who married Devona Melton. Terric and Adelina are the present generation of the English side of that line. Antoine de Montbryce's descendants govern Château Belisle. Giroux Castle is in the hands of the descendants of a colorful character named Izzy de Montbryce, Hugh's second son. Despite suffering the burden of arthritic hands, he became one of Normandie's most renowned warriors. His wife was Spanish."

Marguerite hadn't realized the Montbryces was so widespread.

“Your family has married into different cultures, Irish, Spanish, English.”

He sifted his fingers through her hair. “And we haven’t touched on the illegitimate side of the family, the FitzRams. One of their ancestors married a count from Saxony; his twin wed a Scottish lass; their sister ended up married to a Danish prince.”

“Good heavens,” she exclaimed.

“But, no matter what, we have always remained unified. That’s our strength. Unity has helped us survive political upheavals.”

“Like the one we are living through now.”

“*Oui*. I’m confident all the castles are ready. My presence representing the head of the clan is simply to reassure them all will be well.”

Afraid to ask if he truly believed that, she pressed her arms against his chest, raised her head and teased him instead. “Your mother is right; it’s good you’re going away. I would be distracted if you were here.”

“Love me to distraction, do you?” he taunted, his gaze fixed on her breasts. “If you find yourself with nothing to do while you pine for my return, you can always decorate this chamber to your liking. After all, you’re going to be spending a lot of time here when I get back.”

Ups And Downs

The Montbryces did their best to cheer Marguerite in Becket's absence, and she was kept busy with preparations for their wedding. She spent hours being measured and fitted by the castle's seamstresses, thrilled that the silk gown they were fashioning for her would be the finest garment she'd ever worn.

Father Guillaume conducted what amounted to a lengthy inquisition into her past. She took courage from Lady Hollis' presence by her side and by the priest's ultimate pronouncement he was satisfied she had never married.

Becket's mother also took it upon herself to tutor her soon-to-be daughter-by-marriage in the responsibilities of a *comtesse*. A complete tour of the castle led by Steward Bonhomme took three days. She was heartened by the genuine respect of all the servants she met.

Marguerite was in the solar one afternoon a fortnight after Becket's departure. She was keeping company with his parents when Adrien entered with news from Terric de Quincey. "It seems King John was incensed the morning Marguerite went missing at Melton Manor; he had the stables torched when he was leaving."

Her innards knotted. "I knew he'd be angry. This is my fault."

"No, my dear," the *comte* replied. "John has been known to torch properties without any provocation whatsoever—even places where he's been warmly received."

Marguerite knew this was true, but it didn't lessen her immense regret. "Did they lose horses?"

"Apparently not, and rebuilding has already begun," Adrien replied. "But that's not the worst news."

Marguerite's stomach tightened anew.

"The king ordered Adelina to court. He deemed Terric incapable of protecting his sister. Adelina is now John's ward."

Sick at heart, Marguerite buried her face in her hands. "She is paying for helping me escape."

"And she would do it again," Lady Hollis insisted. "But it's unlikely John knows of the tunnel and of her involvement."

Otherwise, the punishment would have been more severe. There are worse things than spending time at court.”

The *comte* nodded his agreement. “If Terric’s wise, he’ll bide his time until John has forgotten the reason he made Adelina his ward.”

“But to be forced to leave her home, and her brother...”

The *comtesse* rubbed her back. “Come now, we cannot let this spoil our happiness. Soon, you’ll be married to my son.”

When two sennights turned into three, Marguerite began imagining all kinds of dire scenarios if Becket failed to return.

She recognized her anxiety was unfounded. Her fiancé regularly sent messages with assurances he and Roland were hale. They reported being more than satisfied with preparations at the other Montbryce holdings.

Still, these were uncertain times in Normandie. Travel could be dangerous, even with a well-armed escort.

Word finally came the brothers had arrived at Giroux Castle, from where they would embark on the journey home.

Everyone’s elation was short-lived when messengers arrived the next day from Rouen. King Philip requested the presence of *Comte* Barr de Montbryce and his heir.

“He wants all the Norman earls to gather there,” Becket’s father explained after speaking with the messengers. “We’re to pay him homage and swear our fealty. Of course, it’s not a request.”



* * *

Looking forward to returning home the next day, Becket was enjoying the last of his evening meal in the Great Hall of Giroux Castle. “If we set off at dawn,” he told Roland, “we can be home in two hours or less.”

“Then I won’t have to put up with your pining for Marguerite

any longer.”

Becket frowned. “I never said a word.”

“You didn’t have to. I can tell when your mind is elsewhere.”

Becket chuckled. He supposed his brother did know him too well. He’d craved Marguerite every minute of every day that he’d been gone. “I admit I’ve missed her,” he allowed.

“Ha!” Roland retorted. “That’s an understatement.”

Becket didn’t blame his brother. He himself hardly understood how he had become so infatuated with a woman he’d known only a short time, and didn’t even like when he first met her. “Wait until you’re in love,” he replied lamely.

“Never happen,” Roland scoffed.

Their exchange was interrupted when the castle’s steward was summoned to the entry by a servant.

Becket’s heart lurched when his father and Adrien were ushered into the hall.

A hush fell over the castle-folk and heads turned when their lord and master left the high table to welcome the newcomers. Becket hurried down from the dais, Roland hard on his heels. He could only assume something had gone awry at Montbryce.

Santiago de Montbryce shook hands with Becket’s father. “Welcome, *Comte Barr*,” he declared. “An unexpected honor. If we’d known...”

“I regret the unannounced visit, Santiago. King Philip has requested my presence in Rouen, and yours too, Becket. We’re to pay him homage and swear fealty.”

Becket’s hopes of returning home to Marguerite’s loving embrace blew away like chaff on the wind. Instead of west to Montbryce, he’d be riding north with his sire.

However, his responsibility now was to support his father who was clearly tired from the journey.

Giroux’s steward set about commanding servants to prepare chambers and victuals for the esteemed visitors.

Santiago escorted Barr de Montbryce to the high table. Becket, Roland and Adrien found places at one of the trestle tables in the hall.

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings,” Adrien said to his brothers. “It’s fortuitous you’re here at Giroux, halfway to Rouen, but it means delaying your return home, Becket. Marguerite is getting anxious.”

“Are we all summoned?” Becket asked, ignoring Roland’s snort.

Adrien shook his head as he tucked into a plate of venison. “Just you and papa. I came along in order to ride back to Montbryce with Roland.”

Becket held up his hand when Roland looked ready to protest. “It’s disturbing enough Papa and I will be absent from Montbryce at the same time. We need both of you to be there.”

He suppressed a smile when Roland sat up straight and agreed.

The Tower Of Rouen

Upon arriving in Rouen at dusk, the Montbryces and their escort erected their tents in fields on the right bank of the Robec, in order to be close to the Tour de Rouen.

They had barely finished the tasty hare roasted by their camp cook when word came of a meeting of the Norman *comtes* who'd been summoned.

They hurried to join the other noblemen in the pavilion of Raoul d'Avranchin. Becket wrinkled his nose upon entering. The confined space reeked of too many anxious men who'd traveled for days on horseback. Raoul exhorted everyone to keep their voices low. Though he had offered his quarters, he deferred to the Montbryces to open the discussion.

"We surmise this will be a formality," Becket's father began. "It's doubtful Philip will make any unreasonable demands if he wants a smooth transition of power."

There was mumbled agreement.

"It churns my gut to contemplate paying homage to a Frenchman," Raymond de Bessin growled.

Many echoed his sentiments.

"He can't be any worse than John Lackland," Raoul replied. "He was more Angevin and English than Norman."

"As was Richard the Lionhearted, who saw us merely as a source of revenue for his crusades," Becket added.

"We've strengthened the fortifications of our holdings," his father informed them. "I assume you have all done the same."

Nodding heads confirmed his assumption.

"We may have to recognize a new king, but we are still a force to be reckoned with," Becket affirmed. "We helped Philip wrest Normandy from John. He would have to be foolish not to realize that the descendants of Vikings don't tolerate despots."

"Right," his father replied. "So, I suggest Raoul breaks open the cask of ale over there and we start behaving like the powerful Norman lords we are."

Loud cheering erupted, followed by gales of laughter when

Raoul countered he'd been looking forward to a tumbler of the famous Montbryce apple brandy.

By the time the Montbryces left Raoul's pavilion an hour later, singing and raucous laughter rang out.

"I hope Philip can hear that racket across the river," Becket declared, proud of his father's ability to rally his dispirited fellow countrymen.

"And that our Norman brethren aren't too hung over when we are summoned on the morrow," Barr de Montbryce replied.



* * *

"Your reassurances have kept me sane," Marguerite confessed to Lady Hollis as they sat in the solar sewing with the ladies of the household.

"Nonsense," the *comtesse* replied. "You have an inner strength."

Marguerite supposed that was true. The years of hurt inflicted by King John had embittered her; the bitterness was ebbing away and she recognized it had taken strength to survive John and the horrors of Gaillard.

"To be frank," Becket's mother continued, "my son will need you to be strong in the challenging times ahead."

"You think King Philip will make life difficult for Normans?"

Lady Hollis shrugged. "Possibly, though he cannot be worse than John. And Philip isn't dealing with a weak, conquered people. He'll have to tread carefully unless he wants an open revolt on his hands."

A cold shiver stole up Marguerite's spine. "The thought of his visit makes me shudder."

"Don't worry. You and Becket will be married as soon as he returns. Philip may not be happy if and when he finds out you are John's cousin. However, I doubt he'll risk taking action against the

wife of a prominent member of our family.”
Marguerite hoped and prayed she was right.



* * *

The next morning, Philip kept the Norman earls waiting in a cramped anteroom for over an hour before they were ushered into his presence.

Becket wasn't surprised. King John had, on occasion, kept him and his father cooling their heels for more than a day.

To a man, the earls bent the knee before Philip. Becket had to admit the tall French king looked more impressive sitting in the ducal throne than John ever had. He was younger than Becket had expected. The tapered goatee, bald head and long nose made his face seem elongated.

“Do you feel it?” Philip suddenly asked, gesturing vaguely in the air.

Becket wasn't sure what surprised him more—the question or the high-pitched voice that seemed at odds with the monarch's masculine bearing.

Judging by the confusion on every Norman face, the earls were equally taken aback.

“Rise from your knees and feel it,” Philip continued. “The ghost of a prince who haunts the place where he was brutally murdered.”

A low murmur scythed its way through the Norman ranks as they rose. Rumor persisted that King John had killed his nephew in the Tower of Rouen, but this was the first time anyone had publicly accused John of murder.

“I see you know of what I speak. Prince Arthur of Brittany was slain by the foul usurper who saw him as a threat. I joined forces with Arthur because, as the son of John's older brother, he had a stronger claim to the throne of England than John. And he would

have made a better monarch who cared about his people.”

Becket resisted the urge to snort. Philip wasn't known for his benevolence toward his own people.

“After Arthur was captured and imprisoned here in this very tower, John attacked him in a drunken rage, tied the body to a rock and threw it into the River Seine.”

Utter silence followed until Philip narrowed his eyes and said cryptically, “I have it on good authority.”

Every man present knew what that meant. Some poor wretch had been tortured into confessing. Although, if the dastardly deed were true, it was doubtful John would leave any witnesses alive to tell the tale.

“Why do I reveal this to you?” Philip asked, his voice more menacing now. “It is the reason you have come to hail me as your new sovereign. As the siege of Gaillard dragged on, it was tempting to abandon it, but Arthur's murder convinced me John was no longer fit to rule Normandie.”

Becket didn't believe in ghosts, yet he did sense an eerie presence in the damp hall built atop the ruins of Rollo's ducal palace. Was Arthur at peace now vengeance had been wrought on his uncle? Was he satisfied that the most powerful men in Normandie would soon kneel before the King of France, and pay him homage?

A calm certainty settled in Becket's heart. He may have betrayed his hereditary duke, but he'd been true to the people of Normandie. The siege was a turning point in his own life as well as in the history of his homeland. Gaillard had brought him Marguerite. He was optimistic its fall would usher in a new era for Normandie.

King Philip

On his knees, swearing fealty to Philip of France, Becket was reminded of a tale passed down through his family for generations.

Hundreds of years ago, Charles, King of the Franks, expected the great Rollo to pay him homage in return for ceding part of his territory to the Vikings. Rollo refused, putting the treaty between the Franks and the Norsemen in jeopardy. Having fought long and hard to claim his piece of the Frankish empire, Becket's ancestor, Bryk Kriger, was unwilling to let Rollo's pride stand in the way. He volunteered to take his chieftain's place. He kissed the king's boot, but *accidentally* pushed the monarch's foot. Charles almost tumbled from his horse.

Standing in a tower built atop the ruins of Rollo's palace, Becket supposed the ceremony in which he was an unwilling participant wasn't much different, although he doubted he'd survive an attempt to tip Philip out of his ducal chair.

Dukes and kings might come and go, but Normans would remain proud descendants of courageous Norwegians who'd left their homeland centuries before in search of a better life in a fertile land.

He inhaled deeply, confident Philip had little idea of the deeply ingrained Viking spirit he foolishly thought would bend to his will.

A sumptuous banquet followed the ceremony. All the Normans were seated at trestle tables in the main part of the hall. None expected the king to invite one or two to sit at the high table with him. However, Becket seethed with irritation and lost his appetite when Pierre de Vause, *Comte de Blois* sat at the king's right hand. After the meal concluded, Vause was introduced by Philip and loudly applauded by the French knights in attendance as the man who'd led the successful siege of Gaillard.

"I don't like it," Becket admitted to his father when they returned to their pavilion. "Vause clearly has the king's ear."

"That doesn't mean he has told Philip about John's missing cousin. He won't want to jeopardize his position by admitting he may have helped a valuable hostage escape."

"True," Becket allowed as they settled into their furs. "With any

luck, he'll assign Vause to supervising the construction of the new castle he proudly announced this evening."

His father chuckled. "And we all know the French are experts at building castles."

Becket shared the humor. "Hopefully, Philip will enlist the aid of Norman builders. We're the true experts, after all."



* * *

Having slept better than expected, Becket was anxious to begin the return journey to Montbryce the following morning. However, Philip had let it be known the Norman earls were to accompany him to the site of his proposed new castle.

After breaking their fast, they rode in the king's wake to a hill north of Rouen. Philip waxed loud and long about the castle he proposed to build, boasting it would be the main seat of power, administration and politics in the duchy for hundreds of years to come.

Becket thought it was a good site but was taken aback when the king turned to his father and asked, "What say the Montbryces to this plan?"

Barr de Montbryce didn't hesitate. "It's a dominant position and such a castle should accomplish what Your Majesty intends—if you build it properly."

Many of the Normans sniggered; the French knights gasped in outrage, but the king nodded. "Point well taken. I intend to engage the best Norman architects and castle builders for the task.

"I understand Montbryce is a fine castle and I'm anxious to see it."

Becket's father bent his head respectfully. "You are more than welcome, Sire."

"Good. We will accompany you when you leave on the morrow.

I understand from the *Comte de Blois* that your son is to be married soon. My presence at the wedding of a Norman *vicomte* will be a fitting way to mark the beginning of my tenure as Duke of Normandie and, of course, your king.”

The Montbryces exchanged a glance. There was no way they could object. “You honor me, Your Majesty,” Becket lied.



* * *

Marguerite and Lady Hollis were strolling through the inner bailey of Montbryce Castle, taking advantage of a bright sunny morning. Marguerite had come to realize that one of the *comtesse's* strengths was her ability to relate to the peasants who worked in the castle. She never missed an opportunity to inquire about their sons and daughters, or to ask after a sick relative.

They were sharing a jest with a washerwoman when a hue and cry went up. Squawking chickens flew out of the way of a knight who rode into the bailey, his horse lathered.

Marguerite's heart stuttered when she recognized him as one of the men who'd gone to Rouen with *Comte Barr*. The color drained from the *comtesse's* face, but she squeezed Marguerite's hand. “Let's not assume the worst.”

The knight slid from his horse and fell to his knees at Lady Hollis' feet, clearly exhausted. “My lady,” he rasped. “*Comte Barr* sent me to warn you. The king is on his way.”

Marguerite might have swooned had Becket's mother not kept her upright. She struggled to control the panic surging in her throat. Lady Hollis was right. A *comtesse* had to be courageous in the face of danger.

“How soon?” she asked as Roland and Adrien ran out of the keep.

The knight gulped water from a ladle offered by a bystander.

"They were to set off the morning after I was despatched," he panted. "I doubt the king's retinue will travel at the same speed, but they could arrive this evening or, more likely, on the morrow."

"No time to lose," Lady Hollis declared. "Marguerite, you and I will organize the cooks. Adrien, see to this brave knight and his horse. Roland, find Bonhomme and let him know what is happening."

As she hurried away with her future mother-by-marriage, it struck Marguerite that taking decisive action was far better for the soul than panicking.

She could only hope she'd one day be able to emulate Lady Hollis' courage.

The French king's imminent arrival might spell doom for her marriage, and even signal the end of her life, but she had a responsibility to do whatever was necessary to support the noble family who had welcomed her with open arms.

A Fly On The Wall

“At the stately pace Philip has set,” Becket’s father’s remarked as Montbryce came in sight, “our ladies should have had at least a day to prepare for our arrival.”

Becket worried about Marguerite. It seemed the happiness that was within her grasp would be cruelly torn away. He longed to take her into his embrace and comfort her; however, drawing Philip’s attention to her distress would raise questions. It was worrisome enough the loathsome Vause had accompanied them from Rouen.

The king reined to a halt and scanned the horizon. “Every bit as impressive as I expected,” he exclaimed. His French courtiers gaped, clearly awed by the sight of the imposing castle atop its promontory.

Becket’s father leaned forward in the saddle. “Impregnable,” he said softly.

Philip chuckled. “Like Gaillard?”

Becket shrugged. “We took note of Gaillard’s weaknesses.”

“Of course,” Philip replied with a smile. “You were there.”

It was the first time the French king had acknowledged the role Normans had played in the fall of the strategic citadel.

Philip stood in the stirrups. “Are those the orchards that provide apples for your brandy?”

“Yes, sire,” Becket replied.

“I’ve tasted it before. Wonderful. I’m glad of an opportunity to see the orchards for myself.”

As they resumed the last leg of their journey, Becket mused that Philip wouldn’t be the first king won over by their famous apple brandy.



* * *

Despite a day and half of whirlwind activities and a restless night's sleep, Marguerite felt strangely calm as King Philip of France rode into the inner bailey of Montbryce Castle.

A pulse thudded in her ears as she sank into a deep curtsy beside the *comtesse*. However, the comforting reason for her fluttering heart was the reassuring smile on Becket's handsome face, not the tall monarch dismounting with the aid of a liveried Montbryce groom.

In the midst of the frenzied preparations, she'd come to a profound realization. Sensing she was intimidated by him, John had manipulated her fear. Older and wiser now, she wasn't about to give Philip the same opportunity.

The king bade Lady Hollis rise and, in broken English, expressed his delight at visiting Montbryce. She replied graciously in perfect French.

Marguerite was tempted to giggle when she heard Philip's surprisingly high-pitched voice, but remained on her knees even when Becket came to stand at her side.

Not to touch him was a torment, but she drew strength from his presence.

Comte Barr introduced Roland and Adrien to the king, then, finally, it was Marguerite's turn.

"May I present Marguerite d'Aigremont, my son's fiancée and the future *Comtesse* de Montbryce."

Hoping her cramped legs wouldn't buckle, she accepted Becket's hand to help her rise. "Your Majesty," she replied, determined to meet the French monarch's steely gaze.

She wasn't sure what to make of the glint in the dark eyes, until he replied, "Ah, *oui*. King John's English cousin. *Enchanté*."



* * *

Becket saw no point in denying Marguerite's identity. Vause had clearly not believed the tale of the missing nun's death. Nor, apparently, had he hesitated to pass on his suspicions to his king.

Becket feared Marguerite might swoon. However, she surprised him. "I am distantly related to the former Duke of Normandie," she replied without hesitation. "As you know, Majesty, we cannot choose our relatives, unless we are fortunate enough to marry into a noble family."

Becket wanted to applaud the performance. His fiancée obviously knew of Philip's marital missteps that had resulted in France being subject to a papal interdict for more than two years.

A shocked silence followed, until a broad grin split the king's ruddy face and he guffawed with laughter. "Indeed, Lady Marguerite, and I cannot wait to make sure King John learns of your marriage to the son of my prominent Norman ally."

Marguerite smiled. "What I wouldn't give to be a fly on the wall when he hears the news, Your Majesty."

Breathing more easily, Becket acquiesced when King Philip asked permission to escort Marguerite into the keep of Montbryce Castle.



* * *

Marguerite deemed it ironic. It was through King John she had learned of Philip's marital problems. Her cousin had derided the French king's unsuccessful attempts to have his marriage to Ingeborg of Denmark annulled. John's glee knew no bounds when he learned Philip had been forced by papal interdict to accept Ingeborg as his wife though he had married again in the interim and sired children.

She'd taken a risk using the knowledge to save herself, though she got the feeling the French king had already decided her proposed marriage to Becket de Montbryce represented the perfect insult to offer John.

The wily Philip was reputed to be easily excited and easily placated, but it wouldn't be wise to underestimate him. However, as she paraded into the castle on the king's arm, she was filled with cautious optimism for the future. The last obstacle to her marriage had been overcome.

Doubts

After a brief exchange of pleasantries in the entryway, Becket's parents escorted the king to the chambers prepared for him.

Becket took Marguerite into his embrace, relieved to feel the tension gradually leave her body as they clung together for long minutes, impervious to the bustle of activity going on around them. "You were magnificent," he whispered.

"I decided I've cringed before kings for too long," she replied. "But it was risky."

"Well, you gambled and we both won. The hurdle of your kinship has been dealt with. I can make you my wife with Philip's blessing."

"We can't let our guard down," she warned as they walked to his chamber. "Kings can be unpredictable."

He agreed. "I anticipate some difficult discussions during this visit. Philip's here to assess our loyalty."

"It's rumored at the English court that he enjoys good food, wine, and women," she said with a smile. "Your mother has planned banquets that will more than satisfy the first two requirements at least."

"I've heard he's generous to his friends and vindictive towards those who displease him," Becket added. "If his demands are fair, there's no reason the Montbryces shouldn't remain on his good side."

"However, we can't lose sight of the fact he's a canny strategist. They say he makes judgements quickly and sticks to his decisions with stubborn resolve."

"One thing I am confident of," she said as they entered his chamber. "Your father is no fool. He'll handle Philip."

Chuckling, Becket shrugged off his gambeson. "You sound like a *comtesse* already."

She smiled in the beguiling way that never failed to arouse him. "Now, wife-to-be, I am tired and need you to ease my weary body."

"It will be my pleasure, husband-to-be. Boots first?"



* * *

An hour later, Marguerite traced her fingers through the sheen on Becket's back. Warm, male essence bonded their bodies, but she knew Becket longed to spill inside her and not between her breasts. He'd brought her to release, but her most intimate place still ached for his possession. "Soon," she whispered.

He eased away and lay beside her, elbow bent to support his head as he gazed at her. "The waiting is killing me."

"I love you for it," she admitted, cupping his face in her hands. "I suppose I've always hoped my husband would claim my maidenhead on our wedding night."

He narrowed his eyes, but said nothing. His silence blunted the joy of their recent intimacy. He thought she wasn't a virgin.

The urge to protest her innocence was powerful, but she couldn't blame him for believing she'd been violated during the siege. She was no longer in the first flush of youth and had been betrothed more times than she cared to remember.

However, she would wait until they joined their bodies. Then he would know for certain he was the first, and only man to possess her.

The prospect was tantalizing.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"It's not important," she lied.



* * *

Becket had learned how to pleasure a woman. He'd had lots of practice as a youth but had never spilled inside a woman's body. Truth be told, he'd never wanted to—until now.

Previous sexual encounters had been about satisfying male urges. He'd been fond of the willing women he'd lain with but, now, love was involved. Every heated glance, every breathless kiss, every intimate touch was proving to be an exhilarating experience unlike any he'd known before.

The prospect of plunging his shaft into Marguerite's warm, wet sheath was driving him out of his wits. He hoped and prayed he'd discover she was a virgin when their bodies finally joined. He supposed it was every man's fantasy that his bride would come virgin to his bed. He thirsted to know how it felt to breach a maidenhead.

However, if Marguerite wasn't a virgin, he was sure she would not have given herself willingly. He must be careful never to make her believe he loved her less because some brute had stolen her innocence. "I love you," he whispered, hoping she hadn't seen the doubt in his eyes. "Much as I'd prefer to spend the rest of the evening in bed with you, I suppose we'll have to prepare for the banquet. A king awaits."



* * *

Heads bowed as King Philip led the procession into Montbryce's great hall, the smiling *comtesse* on his arm. Marguerite admired Lady Hollis' courageous determination to reassure her people.

Excitement bubbling in her throat, Marguerite followed next on *Comte* Barr's arm. The resentful, harried woman who'd first come to the castle was gone. Love had magically turned her back into the

optimistic person she used to be.

Smiles and respectful nods from castle folks assembled in the crowded hall were a far cry from the suspicious glares she'd formerly been subjected to. They recognized her love for their *vicomte*.

Becket and his brothers entered last.

Philip sat down in the *comte's* chair, but no one in the hall took their seat until all of the Montbryces had done so. The king showed no outward sign of annoyance at this mark of respect for the *comte's* family.

Seated several places away from the monarch, Marguerite didn't have to worry about conversing with him. Becket's intoxicating presence beside her was another matter.

The woman who'd never given much thought to sexual congress was suddenly a seething mass of cravings and desires. She fluttered her eyelashes at Becket, thrust out her breasts and licked her lips. He flared his nostrils, smiled seductively and guided her hand to his arousal under the table.

As the meal progressed and the arrival of dish after astonishing dish evoked ever louder exclamations of delight, the only person in the hall who seemed not to be enjoying himself was Pierre de Vause. He alone among the visiting French soldiers wore a deep frown as he glared at Marguerite.

"I suppose he'll always resent me for tricking him at Gaillard," she told Becket as the banquet drew to a close.

He put his free arm around her shoulder and narrowed his eyes at the French *comte*. "I think he's more annoyed you've won over the king."

A hush fell over the gathering when Becket's father stood, goblet in hand. "People of Montbryce and honored guests," he intoned. "I ask that you drink to the health of King Philip of France. With our help, he has won suzerainty over our beloved Normandie. I know he will come to love it as we do. I am confident he will defend us from any threat and ensure we remain prosperous and free of tyranny. Rise to honor your king. Philip Augustus."

The crowd rose as one and lifted tankards and goblets. "Philip Augustus," they cried.

"Perfect," Marguerite whispered to Becket.

"We'll find out on the morrow when we meet with him in private," he replied.

Everyone was about to sit but remained standing when the French king stood.

“Or maybe we’re about to find out,” Marguerite said.

“I thank the *comte* and *comtesse* de Montbryce for their warm welcome,” Philip declared. “From what I have seen of Normandie, it is indeed a beautiful land and you are rightly proud of it. A new day has dawned, and it is fitting I shall be here to witness the marriage of your *vicomte* on the morrow. I drink to the health and happiness of Lord Becket and Lady Marguerite.”

The toast echoed as the French king drained his goblet then regained his seat.

As the thunderous racket of tankards banging on tables filled the air, Marguerite looked into Becket’s eyes. “Until the morrow,” they both whispered at once.

Delayed Gratification

Becket rose early and summoned a bath. He was toweling himself dry when his valet appeared with his wedding outfit. He and Marguerite had deemed it wiser to sleep in separate bedchambers since it was likely the *comtesse* would come early to help prepare her future daughter-by-marriage. It was for the best, but he'd missed waking with her breast in his hand and her perfume in his nostrils.

He hoped his bride would be pleased with the black velvet doublet and woollen leggings. "I like the slashed sleeves," he told Robert.

His valet agreed. "The blue satin peeping through adds a certain something, though I'd have preferred red."

Becket shrugged. "*Maman* insisted on blue."

Robert tapped his dimpled chin. "A man cannot argue with his mother on such an occasion."

They were sharing the humor when Bonhomme arrived with a summons from Becket's father. "*Milord Comte* is in his solar, with King Philip," the steward explained. "It would appear the king wishes to convene a meeting before your wedding. I'm to summon your brothers."

Becket's spirits fell. The ceremony had been planned for early in the morning so guests might then partake of the wedding breakfast. But when a king calls...

"My mother will not be happy," he muttered under his breath.

"Nor will your bride," Bonhomme replied.

Robert suggested he carry the plumed hat he planned to wear to the church.

His brothers—both clad in their best raiment—had arrived before him. He thought better of excusing his tardiness. Mention of a wedding might not be appropriate given Philip's surly demeanor.

"We were discussing the king's suggestion of the *Comte* de Blois as Governor of Normandie," Becket's frowning father explained.

"It's not a suggestion," Philip hissed.

Becket was tempted to express his outrage, but he had learned

diplomacy from his father. "Vause is a competent soldier, Your Majesty," he allowed. "Are you confident he has the skill to govern? As you know, it takes flexibility and wisdom to be a successful leader."

He hesitated to continue when Philip clenched his already stern jaw, but his father took over. "The people of Normandie assisted in the ouster of King John. They did not do so in order to replace one tyrant with another. They will not respect a governor who has no love for Normans."

Eyes narrowed, Philip stroked his beard. "You speak plainly, *Comte Barr*. I have executed people for less."

The Montbryces held their peace. The king might utter threats but he was wise enough to know it wouldn't be productive to make a martyr out of a prominent and well-respected Norman *comte*.

Finally, Philip broke the silence. "I suppose you think you would make a better governor."

Becket's father smiled. "I'm confident I would, and it would be a great honor. However, I must decline since I have no wish to spend most of my time in Rouen."

Philip's eyes widened. "You're not an ambitious man, I take it."

"Only on behalf of my country."

"Which is now part of mine."

"And I am sure France will cherish the jewel she has acquired."

Becket was afraid his father had pushed the king too far, but Philip smiled. "We will ponder this matter later. Now, we have a wedding to attend."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Becket bowed as the French monarch exited the solar. He settled the plumed hat on his head and smiled at his father. "I'm to be married after all."

Barr de Montbryce grinned. "And I'm still alive to see it!"



Marguerite had never seen the *comtesse* so upset. The delay caused by the king was worrisome and annoying, but Lady Hollis clearly took it as an affront to the family.

“If this is how Philip intends to treat the noble families of Normandie...”

Marguerite tried to reassure her future mother-by-marriage. “All shall be well,” she said softly, fervently hoping she spoke true.

“How can he be so thoughtless?” Lady Hollis demanded. “The bride is dressed and ready—and you look so very beautiful in the blue silk, my dear girl.”

Her agitation infected the ladies of her household who were all atwitter over the delay.

It was a curious reversal of roles. Marguerite could scarcely believe she was the calmest person in the chamber—outwardly, at least.

The arrival of a grim-faced Father Guillaume put an abrupt end to the hubbub. “The groom awaits his bride at the chapel door,” he announced in a sonorous voice usually reserved for pronouncements about the wages of sin.

It was as if a wizard had waved a magic wand. Lady Hollis smiled. Her ladies smiled. Even Marguerite smiled, trying to calm the winged creatures that had suddenly taken flight in her belly.



* * *

Becket should feel honored King Philip of France had deigned to attend his wedding, but the monarch’s decision to sit atop his horse while they waited outside the chapel door was irksome.

His irritation and all thoughts of selfish kings fled when he espied Marguerite coming toward him on his father’s arm.

“I suddenly understand the reason for the blue,” he whispered to Roland who stood beside him.

His brother eyed him as if he'd lost his wits.

Becket touched his sleeve. "Blue slashes, same as my bride's gown."

Roland rolled his eyes. "Our mother's doing, I would guess."

"Hush," Father Guillaume said with a scowl, his attention all on the king's snorting horse.

The tableau suddenly struck Becket as comical, but he removed his hat, passed it to Roland and tamped down the urge to laugh out loud. It wouldn't do to behave like a giddy child with a king watching.

His father placed Marguerite's warm hand in his. He returned her bright smile, overwhelmed by the rightness of what was about to take place. He inhaled deeply when the priest cleared his throat and launched into the Latin rite that would bind him forever to the woman he loved.

A Wedding

After the preliminaries, Father Guillaume switched to Norman French. Marguerite was relieved, but the king scowled. She didn't care. There was nothing Philip of France could do to spoil her joy. A spectacularly handsome warrior waited to pledge himself to her. She licked her dry lips, awed by the black raiment that suited his lean, well-muscled body and powerful legs.

"Behold, brethren," the priest declared, jolting her thoughts from carnal matters. "We have come hither in the sight of God, the angels, and all his saints in the presence of the church, to join together two bodies, of this man and of this woman. I shall now examine the persons so that henceforth they may be one in flesh and two spirits in faith and in the law of God, at the same time to the promised eternal life, whatever they have done previously."

Marguerite gritted her teeth. Surely the interminable questions about her previous betrothals weren't going to be dragged up again.

"Get on with it, priest," the king shouted. "I'm sure you've already conducted a thorough investigation."

Becket squeezed her hand. She dared not risk glancing at him lest she laugh.

The color drained from Father Guillaume's wrinkled face. "Therefore, I warn you all," he went on, "that if any of you know anything to speak, why these two persons cannot be lawfully joined together, he is to confess it now."

Clearly aware of the king's impatience, he pressed on without pause. "Becket de Montbryce, do you wish to have this woman as a wife, and to esteem her, to honor, hold, and protect her, healthy and sick, just as a husband ought to do for a wife, and to forsake all other women, and to cling to her so long as your life and hers will endure?"

"I so wish," Becket replied, his deep voice echoing in her heart.

"Marguerite d'Aigremont, do you wish to have this man as a husband, and to obey him, to serve, esteem, honor, and guard him, healthy and sick, just as a wife ought to do for a husband, and to forsake all other men, and to cling to him so long as your life and

his will endure?"

Yes, yes, a thousand times yes.

"I so wish," she replied.

Becket turned to look into her eyes and repeated his vows following the priest's lead. "I, Becket de Montbryce take thee, Marguerite d'Aigremont, to my wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death us do part, if Holy Church will it permit, and thereto I plight thee my troth."

Never taking her gaze from Becket's, Marguerite pledged herself to him. "I, Marguerite d'Aigremont, take thee, Becket de Montbryce, to my wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to be cheerful and lively in bed and board till death us do part, if Holy Church will it permit, and thereto I plight thee my troth."

She resolved to punish Becket later for grinning when she vowed to be lively in bed.

The priest blessed the gold ring Roland produced. Gratitude filled Marguerite's heart as Becket slid the circle onto her finger. It was difficult to believe this generous, honorable knight had given his noble heart to her. She silently pledged to do everything in her power to be a worthy wife.

The king led the cheering when the priest announced they were man and wife but, as they processed into the chapel for the nuptial mass, Marguerite wondered what Philip was going to do with his horse.



* * *

Scant sennights ago, Becket had dreaded spending hours on his knees next to Marguerite. As the nuptial mass progressed, all he

could think of was the warmth of her arm touching his as they knelt before the altar. His hips, however, began to object when Father Guillaume settled into the second half hour of his remarks after the Eucharist.

When Philip didn't lead the procession to receive the sacrament, Becket began to think the king hadn't entered the chapel. He also suspected the monarch would have been too impatient to listen to the priest's diatribe.

His suspicions were confirmed when he and Marguerite finally left the chapel hand in hand. There was no sign of the king nor his retinue.

"He left," his grinning father informed them as he offered Becket his hand. "Urgent matters called him away, apparently."

Marguerite squeezed his hand when the Gaillard orphans approached. The boys bowed and the girls effected reasonable curtsies. Clearly, someone had taught them well. His throat constricted when Jacqueline rose and offered his wife a small posy of violets. "God bless you, my lady," she said.

His bride swallowed hard as she accepted the gift.

Smiling through tears, his mother embraced Marguerite. "Welcome to our family, daughter. Now, we can enjoy the wedding breakfast in peace."

One arm still around his wife's waist, Becket bent to kiss his mother's cheek. "Thank you, *maman*, for everything."

"You're a good man and I'm proud of you," she replied. "You deserve to be happy with a woman you love. It makes life so much easier."

Roland slapped him on the back. "You've finally fallen victim to the family curse. May I kiss your bride?"

It would be churlish to refuse. "You may, but that doesn't mean I'll be pleased about it."

Inwardly annoyed, he laughed along with everyone else when his brother lingered a little too long over the kiss; he had to bear in mind Roland was baiting him. "Move aside," he finally said, taking hold of his brother's shoulders. "Let Adrien greet his new sister."

Adrien pecked a shy kiss on Marguerite's cheek. "Welcome to the family," he said softly.

Becket's father was the last to take the hand of his daughter-by-marriage. "You are heaven sent, Marguerite de Montbryce," he declared, brushing a courtly kiss on her knuckles.

Becket pondered his father's words as the family made its way across the bailey. Perhaps heaven did have a hand in bringing together two soul mates who, at the outset, seemed completely wrong for each other.

Whether it was heaven, or fate, or simply a happy accident, he was grateful for the gift of a loving wife. When they entered the Great Hall, the rousing cheer that greeted them warmed his heart. The people of Montbryce also recognized his marriage as a blessing.

Impatient

“Your mother was right,” Marguerite told Becket as they shared their first meal as man and wife. “The atmosphere is much less strained without the king here.”

“It appears a couple of French soldiers told the stable hands they were returning to Rouen,” he replied.

“So, having discovered that stealing Montbryce would be a monumental task, he has perhaps decided your other holdings are probably as well fortified.”

“Our holdings,” he corrected. “One day, I hope in the very distant future, I’ll be *comte*, and you’ll be my *comtesse*.”

She’d known what marriage to Becket would entail, but hearing him voice it aloud made it more real. “I pray I’ll be equal to the task.”

He meshed his fingers with hers and raised her hand to his lips. “I’m not concerned. In fact, I feel more confident about inheriting the title and all its responsibilities now I have you as my helpmate.”

She nestled into him when he put an arm around her shoulders. “I’m lucky I found you. One day, when it’s safe to travel, I’d like to find Sister Thomasse and thank her.”

“She’ll be surprised when we turn up with our children,” he said with a chuckle.

His jest stoked the flame of anticipation. “How soon can we leave the hall?”

He wiggled his eyebrows. “Impatient?”

Heat flooded her face. “I am,” she confessed.

He placed her hand atop the warm bulge at his groin. “No more so than I. However, I’m certain my father will want to offer a toast before we leave.”



* * *

Becket was surprised and somewhat apprehensive when it was Roland who came to his feet with goblet raised. "I think it's important to tell you a few things about my eldest brother," he announced.

"This should be good," Becket whispered, though he'd changed his mind by the time Roland had recounted several scrapes the brothers had gotten into when they were younger.

"You were a scallawag," Marguerite teased.

"I still am," he retorted, "but we'll be here all day if he intends to tell every tale, some of which are better left untold, I might add."

"I see I'm embarrassing my brother," Roland quipped, "however..."

Their father cleared his throat and got to his feet. Pouting, Roland took the hint and sat.

"Thank goodness," Becket said.

"I was enjoying the stories," Marguerite protested.

"How about you, Adrien?" Becket's father asked.

"Good lord."

Adrien stood and raised his goblet. "I just want to say I am enormously proud to be Becket's little brother. And I'm very happy he finally found the right partner. Please drink to the health of Becket and Marguerite de Montbryce."

The toast echoed around the hall. Becket hoped he might soon escape with his bride and finally make her his, but he didn't like the wink his father sent his way. "He's going to make me wait," he told his wife.

"I can't wait much longer," she replied, intensifying his torment.



* * *

Much as Marguerite wanted to hear the *comte's* toast to his son, she also thirsted to finally join her body to Becket's. The anticipation and the warmth of the firm, male flesh beneath her hand were making her sweat in a most unladylike manner.

She also felt a little left out, since no member of her family was present to sing her praises. And what would they say, anyway? There were too many aspects of her past she'd prefer the people of Montbryce not know.

Becket's father surprised her. "You've heard a great deal about my son, but I'd like to toast the other person without whom there would be no celebration and no happy ending."

"We are blessed that Marguerite hails from the same part of England as my wife, your *comtesse*."

The wide-eyed surprise and beaming smiles seemed to indicate most had not been aware of this.

"She is courageous. You probably do not know she was prepared to single-handedly fight off a pack of wolves in order to protect the orphans from Gaillard."

Gasps ensued.

Marguerite squirmed, uncomfortable with being the center of attention. "You told him?" she whispered to Becket.

"I did not, but I'm glad he knows."

"Speaking of Gaillard, how many of us would have had the courage to don a disguise in order to escape the doomed citadel and almost certain death?"

Utter silence as folks shook their heads.

"You may know the tale of her bravery in escaping King John's clutches not so long ago."

"You were the brave one," she insisted to Becket.

"By the way, she is related to our former duke, but I suppose nobody's perfect."

Gales of laughter resulted, until the *comte* raised his hand. "However, the most important thing about Marguerite de Montbryce is that she loves my son. I invite you to drink to the health of your future *comtesse*."

"Our future *comtesse*," echoed around the hall.

"Now," the *comte* shouted, "you can whisk your bride off to your chambers."

Marguerite squealed when her grinning husband scooped her up and carried her from the hall amid the din of cheers and foot stomping.

"You're blushing, my love," he teased as he embarked on the stairs. "Are you too hot?"

"I'm on fire," she replied, snaking her arms around his neck.

Fulfillment

On the cusp of satisfying his heart's desire, Becket suddenly felt strangely unsure as he and Marguerite stood face to face in his chamber.

"I feel like a green lad with his first tumble," he admitted, immediately regretting the coarse remark. This wasn't going the way he'd planned—probably because he hadn't thought past the notion of falling on his bride like a wild thing and making her his.

"I'm nervous too," she replied, reaching for the hem of her gown.

He watched, rooted to the spot as she slowly and seductively raised the skirts to reveal a shapely calf, a pretty knee, a mouth-watering thigh—and the jeweled sheath of a dagger strapped to it.

"I wondered what happened to that," he exclaimed, more aroused than he thought possible. "Do you intend to fight off my weapon with yours?"

Her laughter as she thrust back her head and dropped her skirts only intensified his need.

"No," she replied, suddenly wistful, "I had no family present, so I wore my grandfather's dagger."

He gathered her into his arms. "I understand. I didn't know it belonged to your grandfather. Rest assured, the Montbryces are your family now. I am your family. You will never be lost and alone again."

She inhaled deeply and lifted her gown to reveal both legs. "Are you going to disarm me, my lord?"

He fell to his knees, kissing her thigh before he tackled the bindings. "That was my plan, but..."

His thoughts became muddled when he glimpsed a hint of red curls guarding the place he most wanted to be. If she lifted the fabric just a bit more...

The unmistakable aroma of female arousal did him in. Tossing the dagger aside, he lifted his bride, elated when she wrapped her legs around his hips.

Any notion of slow foreplay flew away like startled birds when

he put her down on the bed and she opened her legs.

Eyes fixed on the glistening pink prize, he quickly divested himself of his clothing. His heart full, he climbed on the bed and positioned his rampant shaft at her opening.

“Fill me,” she whispered, splaying her hands on his chest. “I’ve waited so long.”

Jaw clenched, he hesitated. If she wasn’t a virgin, he must not allow any hint of disappointment to cast a shadow on their first joining.

The trust in her eyes spurred him on. “I love you,” he rasped, before thrusting into a warm, wet, welcoming sheath.

She must have made some sound at the moment he breached her maiden’s gate, but the exultant shout of a madman was all he heard.

Overwhelmed by a maelstrom of elated emotions when her body heated and she began to moan, he drove as deeply inside her as he could. “Come with me,” he rasped from his dry throat.

He soared with angels when she cried out her fulfillment and he too found his release.



* * *

Marguerite had lain naked with Becket before, but this was different. The most intimate part of his body was inside her. They were one, and her heart knew he was the lover she’d always been destined for.

The stolen pleasures they’d shared before paled in comparison to the ecstasy of releasing with Becket’s thick manhood filling her. Having climbed a mountain of wondrous sensations as he moved within her, she’d fallen into an abyss of blissful rapture when his warm seed flooded her womb.

She’d welcomed the long-awaited, fleeting pain of a breached

maidenhead and his triumphant cry of surprised joy.

"I'm too heavy," he whispered, nibbling her ear.

"No," she replied, tightening her grip around his waist when he tried to move.

She felt bereft when his maleness slowly left her body and curled up at her entrance. "I miss you already," she murmured.

"Trust me," he chuckled, his breath warm on her neck, "it won't be long before we do this again."

Tracing her fingertips across his broad back, she took a risk. "Were you surprised?"

He raised up on his elbows and looked into her eyes. "I admit to being a selfish, prideful male. I wanted to be the first."

"And you were," she replied. She'd heard it said a man lost interest once he'd bedded a woman, but the love in Becket's gaze and the male flesh stirring anew between her legs said otherwise.

"It wouldn't have made any difference to my feelings for you," he said. "But I cannot deny it was incredible when your body opened to welcome me."

"For me too," she replied.

"I'll be strutting around like a rooster every time I think of it," he quipped, brushing his thumbs over her nipples.

"So, now I know the reason men do that," she countered, thrusting her hips when desire spiraled through her again.

"Minx," he replied. "You're insatiable."

"I think you may be right," she agreed, astonishing herself with the admission. "I can't get enough of you."

"We'll go slowly this time. I couldn't help myself."

Too choked with happiness to speak, she smiled like a contented cat as they once more began the long, slow climb to ecstatic release.



The people gathering in the great hall for the evening meal cheered and whistled loudly when Becket and Marguerite appeared.

His wife's deep blush was probably enough to confirm everyone's assumption they'd spent the day consummating their union.

He escorted Marguerite to her seat at the high table, bowed to his smiling parents and scowled at Roland's silly grin. "What ails you, brother?"

"Nothing. I assume all went well since you're strutting like a cock newly come from the henhouse."

Becket made no reply, glancing at Marguerite as he took his seat next to his sire; she was trying to hide her amusement, but merriment danced in her green eyes. He took hold of her hand, lifted it to his mouth and bestowed a kiss, much to the delight of the jubilant crowd. He'd never shared a secret jest with a woman. The prospect of a lifetime of shared secrets stirred renewed interest at his groin.

Now they were married, there was no need to hide his desire for his wife. Slowly and deliberately, he moved her hand to his arousal, arching his brows so the crowd couldn't fail to realize what he'd done.

Marguerite's lustful gaze swept away any lingering doubts as the crowd erupted. Even blushing women applauded.

"They love you," his bride said.

"They are happy for us both," he replied, confident it was true.



* * *

In the sennights following her marriage, two events intruded on Marguerite's happiness.

The Montbryces were relieved to hear King Philip had returned to Paris, but furious he'd appointed Vause as Governor of

Normandie, despite their advice to the contrary.

She was pleasantly surprised to be included, and her opinions sought, when the family convened in the Council Chamber to discuss the possible ramifications of Vause's appointment with several of the castle's senior commanders.

Everyone acknowledged the *Comte de Blois* had no love for the people of Normandie, nor for the land itself. He likely considered the Montbryces his enemies, though the family refused to allow Marguerite to blame herself.

"He resented me before he ever met you," Becket assured her. "It angered him that he needed the help of Norman soldiers to bring about the fall of Gaillard."

Word came from Terric; he was present at the English court, trying to convince King John to allow his sister to return home to Melton Manor, when messengers brought news of Marguerite's marriage.

Terric described the king's resulting temper tantrum as akin to a spoiled child being deprived of his favorite plaything but, unfortunately, it hardened his determination to keep Adelina as his ward.

However, Terric's sister was apparently content, having been appointed as lady-in-waiting by John's jealous queen.

Marguerite was thankful to be far away from England and safe from John's grasp. "Isabella of Angoulême is well aware of her husband's proclivities," she remarked. "She will protect Adelina from the king."

Epilogue

1206 Ad

Becket could scarcely wait to share the news with his wife. However, when he burst into their chamber and discovered Marguerite nursing Raoul, he momentarily forgot the reason he was in such a hurry.

“Papa,” sixteen month old Simon cried, tottering toward him, arms outstretched.

He picked up his sturdy son and stood beside his wife. “Are you helping *maman* take care of your baby brother?”

Apparently unwilling to respond, Simon squirmed to be put down.

“That one can’t be still for two minutes,” Marguerite said as Simon toddled off to play with their ever-patient wolfhound. “Is there news?”

Becket fixed his gaze on the suckling babe. “Indeed. John’s attempt to recapture Anjou is a failure. He’s been driven out of Angers, though he and Philip have declared a stalemate. Roland and Adrien are both safe.”

“So, what happens next?” she asked, passing the sated child into his arms.

He lifted Raoul over his shoulder and rubbed the infant’s back. “He’s agreed to a two-year truce, but John rarely honors an agreement. I suspect he’ll use the time to build alliances before he tries again to retake Anjou and Normandie.”

“Philip can’t be happy,” she replied, rearranging her gown to cover her tempting globes.

“He won’t be fully content until he’s driven the Angevin out of every part of France.”

Realizing after a few minutes that his babe had fallen asleep, he carefully placed him in the cradle. Gazing at his youngest child, he gave thanks for his many blessings. But he worried for the people of Montbryce. They were happy for him and his growing family, but an uncertain future still lay ahead for all Normans. Resentment of

French rule simmered in many quarters.

Glad of a chance to hold his wife, he gathered her up and sat down in the chair with her in his lap. “I’ve missed you,” he whispered, sounding too much like a whining child as he cupped a breast. “I’m stupidly jealous of my own son.”

She kissed his cheek. “Not long now,” she reassured him, “and then...”

His body reacted predictably to the promise of once more soaring to the heights of sexual rapture with the woman he loved.



* * *



If you are intrigued by the tale of Barr de Montbryce and Hollis de Moreville’s desperate attempts to prevent the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket, FINALE is their love story.

Here’s an excerpt.

Standing on tiptoe beside her nephews at the very back of the abbey, Hollis de Moreville still couldn’t see the historic events taking place in the chancel. The eye-watering clouds of incense didn’t help matters. When cheers resounded and trumpets blared, she assumed Prince Henry had been crowned.

“Do we have two kings now, Aunty Hollis?” seven-year-old John

asked in a loud voice over the strident din of the church bells. His question earned a glare from a pock-faced woman in front of them.

Hollis bent close to his ear. "King Henry wants to make sure his son becomes king after him."

"I can't see," five-year-old Arthur whined. "Why can't we go near the front with Papa?"

"Because your father is one of the king's favored knights," she replied.

Or so he claims.

"But we're his sons," John retorted.

"Children aren't allowed alongside knights," she improvised, hoping her nephews hadn't paid attention to other sons and daughters who'd accompanied their noble parents.

And your father cannot be bothered with you while he's posturing with his friends.

Arthur frowned. "But..."

Hollis clamped a hand over his mouth and curtsied deeply as King Henry and his newly-crowned son processed past them, followed by the bishops who'd officiated. "Bow," she hissed.

The boys executed the homage exactly as she'd taught them.

"Your father would be proud of you," she whispered after the royal personages had passed and members of the assembled nobility began to file out.

It was impossible not to notice one richly dressed knight in the first group to join the recessional. He stood a head taller than the rest, probably a Scot if the clan brooch at his throat was any indication. He scanned the crowd and she averted her gaze when his eyes met hers. A Northerner herself, she was acquainted with many noble Scottish families, but this strapping knight wore no identifying plaid and he was gone before she could think on it any further.

Not far behind came a knight she did recognize. Sir Bronson FitzRam's flowing red hair was hard to miss. He was from Kirkthwaite Hall in Northumbria, and was perhaps acquainted with the tall Scot. She smiled as Bronson's twin sons came into view. Her brother was fostering the bright lads, though Hollis found it difficult to understand what had prompted the FitzRams to put their trust in Hugh de Moreville.

Given the hundreds of noble families from all over England and Normandie, it seemed to take an eternity for everyone to process

out of the abbey.

It was of some satisfaction that her brother wasn't among the first group to leave. Clearly, he hadn't been as close to the front as he'd claimed.

John stood on tiptoe. "I think I see Papa coming now."

Hollis put a protective arm around both boys' shoulders as Hugh drew near. Knowing her brother, he wouldn't take kindly to being bothered by his sons while he was playing the role of the king's right-hand man.



* * *



If you'd like to read the story of Becket's Scottish grandmother, you'll enjoy JEOPARDY.

Here's an excerpt.

Both doors to the hall creaked open. Bonhomme ushered in the hostages, grandchildren of King David of Scotland. They'd been handed over to *Comte* Geoffrey of Anjou and his wife Maud as a token of good faith to guarantee Scottish support. Maud had requested they be kept at Montbryce.

Alex had known they were children, but hadn't expected a boy and a girl so alike in appearance they could be twins.

A murmur of delight rippled through the hall at the sight of the fair-haired *enfants*, but it ceased gradually as the clink and drag of chains echoed off the stone floor. Alex had been led to believe the hostages were at least fifteen years of age. Henry and Claricia Dunkeld couldn't be more than seven or eight. They'd been chained together, wrists manacled, ankles shackled.

Anger surged up his throat. He leapt to his feet. "Why in the name of all the saints are they in irons? Remove their bonds at once."

Murmurs of agreement with his fury rippled through the crowd of onlookers.

A soldier wearing the devise of *Comte* Geoffrey shuffled forward, a large key in hand. Alex struggled to control the urge to strangle him with his bare hands as the chains clunked to the floor and the man gathered them up. "How long have these children been manacled?"

"Since they arrived in this land, *milord*," a loud female voice replied.

Caught off guard by the undisguised resentment in the speaker's words, he glanced up sharply and, for the first time, noticed the young woman who now gripped the hand of each twin. Wisps of flame-red hair escaped a checkered shawl of brown and grey covering her head. Freckles dotted her nose. High cheekbones and a proud chin added nobility to a woman in servant's garb. Her fresh beauty stunned him. He'd never journeyed to Scotland, but easily conjured a vision of her galloping across wild moorlands on a white horse, her hair a ribbon of red whipped by the wind.

She stared at him defiantly for long moments, rendering him speechless, though he doubted she would reach his shoulder if they stood side by side—an inexplicably appealing notion.

At her nod, the royal infants made their bow and curtsy to Alex. It was a commendable effort considering their age and condition, though the woman kept hold of their hands, providing an anchor. They flushed at the barely discernible smile she bestowed when they glanced up for her approval.

Alex had a peculiar urge to bask in the glow of her smile, but it quickly disappeared when she looked back at him. Though he understood it, he was strangely distressed by the hatred evident in her gaze. She was nursemaid to hostages and thus deprived of freedom. Geoffrey had cruelly ordered her small charges manacled

for some ridiculous reason. She was far from her homeland, and probably not by choice. She was a servant—yet hadn't offered even a perfunctory curtsy.

About Anna

Thank you for reading *Becket*. If you'd like to leave a review where you purchased the book, and/or on Goodreads and BookBub, I would appreciate it. Reviews contribute greatly to an author's success.

I'd love you to visit my [website](#) and my Facebook page, [Anna Markland Novels](#).

Tweet me @annamarkland, join me on [Pinterest](#), or sign up for my [newsletter](#).

Follow me on [BookBub](#) and be the first to know when my next book is released.

<https://www.instagram.com/annamarkland/>



* * *

I was born and educated in England, but I've lived most of my life in Canada. I was an elementary school teacher for 25 years, a job I loved.

After that I worked with my husband in the management of his businesses. He's a born entrepreneur who likes to boast he's never had a job!

My final "career" was as Director of Administration of a global disaster relief organization.

I then embarked on writing a romance, something I'd always wanted to do. I chose the medieval period because it's my favorite to read.

I have a keen interest in genealogy. This hobby has had a tremendous influence on my stories. My medieval romances are

tales of family honor, ancestry, and roots. As an amateur genealogist, I cherished a dream of tracing my own English roots back to the Norman Conquest—most likely impossible since I am not descended from nobility! So, I made up a family and my Montbryce Legacy stories follow its members through successive generations.

I am a firm believer in love at first sight. My heroes and heroines may initially deny the attraction between them, but eventually the alchemy wins out. I want readers to rejoice when the power of love overcomes every obstacle and lovers find their soul mates. For me, novels are an experience of another world and time. I lose myself in the characters' lives, always knowing they will triumph in the end and find love. One of the things I enjoy most about writing historical romance is the in-depth research necessary to provide readers with an authentic medieval experience. I love ferreting out bits of historical trivia and including them in my stories.

I hope you'll escape with me to where romance began and get intimate with history.

Perhaps, you'll come to know and love my cast of characters as much as I do.

I'd like to acknowledge the assistance of my critique group partners, Reggi Alder, Jacquie Biggar, LizAnn Carson, and Sylvie Grayson, and the invaluable contributions of beta reader extraordinaire, Maria McIntyre.